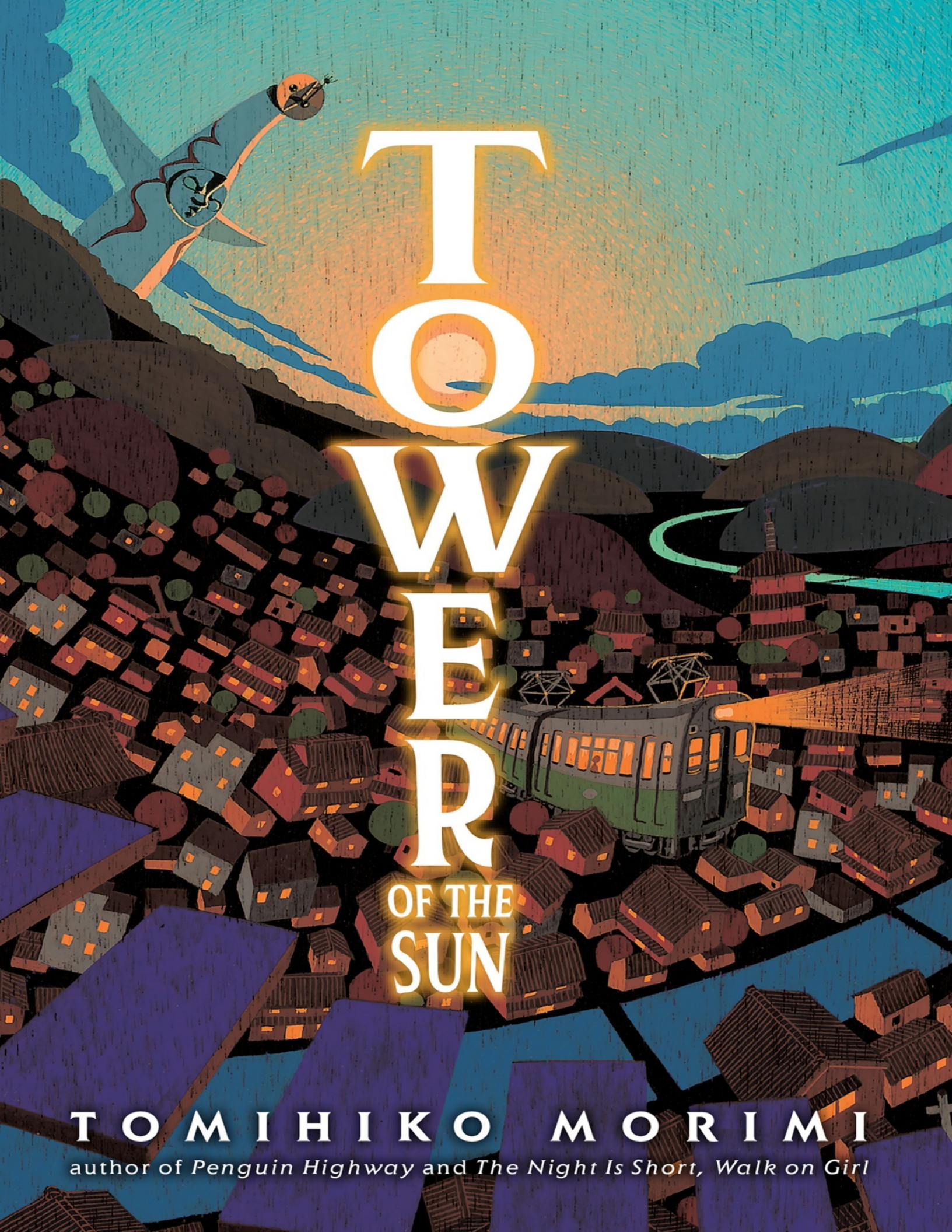
TOWER
OF THE
SUN
TOMIHIKO MORIMI
author of Penguin Highway and The Night Is Short, Walk on Girl

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TOWER OF THE SUN

Tomihiko Morimi

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TOWER OF THE SUN

Tomihiko Morimi

Translation by Stephen Kohler

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Begin Reading

Yen Newsletter

Somehow, in some way, they must be fundamentally mistaken.
I'm sure of it, because there's no way that I'm the one in the wrong.

In commencing this record, I suppose the first things I ought to share are the details of where I was born, and of what an adorable tot I was, and of how my first brush with love transpired in high school, and all that David Copperfield kind of rubbish. But I suspect that dwelling on such matters too long would test my dear readers' patience. Thus, I will endeavor to keep this brief.

I was born in Nara, lived in Osaka for a while, returned to Nara in adolescence, and moved to Kyoto for college. As of this winter, I've resided in Kyoto for roughly five years. At the outset of my fourth year in college, I was enrolled in a research lab in the Faculty of Agriculture, merrily on my way toward graduation until unforeseen circumstances conspired to put me on an extended leave of absence. Suffice it to say, I was grappling with a great load on my mind. I can't remember any of the specifics now, I don't want to remember them, and I have no need to remember. In fact, I intend to conclude the present record without touching on that period of my life at all, as nothing on this earth is more tedious than having to read about a young man's sufferings.

Presently, I am a fifth-year undergraduate student on hiatus—a particularly unsavory character, even among college students.

My first two years in college could be summed up in a single word: *barren*. I mean that in every sense, but my luck with women was particularly dismal.

A friend from high school, who'd gone on to study at a different university in Kyoto, once lamented to me, "It's impossible to find a date in this city when you Kyoto University kids keep snapping up all the college girls."

I was stunned. No matter how I stretched and strained my eyes, I could not for the life of me find evidence of these purported plunderers of women among my peers. If anything, every male in sight—myself included—seemed intent on keeping his chastity carefully intact until the end of time. Whether anyone wished to steal it was beside the point.

So where, I had to wonder, were these fabled Kyoto University beasts, prowling the city's other campuses with torches in hand, swinging the flames to and fro as they cried to every cowering coed, "Come out, come out, wherever you are!" I, for one, had never made any such sightings. And thus I preferred to interpret this particular claim as nothing more than urban legend.

But I would be appalled to have you, dear readers, believe that I was beleaguered in any way by my utter lack of female companionship. Of all the inane emotions in the world, none are further divorced from my mind than self-loathing and guilt. Why, at one time, I even *feared* contact with women, for the havoc I believed romantic feelings would wreak on my capacity for clear thought. I was fully content with the impenetrable circle of homosociality I'd constructed around myself. The only individuals I interacted with were other men who, like me, found the female presence a wholly unnecessary burden in life—or who had themselves been deemed wholly unnecessary by the female population. Birds of a feather, as it were. Together, we relished in our strictly male environment, our minds free to gorge themselves on contemplation and the pursuit of any fancy that struck. We aspired to ever greater heights, our diligence nudging us upward day by day. Soon, we were so high atop our laurels we could no longer hope to get down. We couldn't even stomach a peek over the edge. But we held our tongues, pressing onward, swept up in a mad, men-only folk dance that seemed never to end.

Eventually, I had to acknowledge a growing concern that social rehabilitation might soon prove impossible. If I kept dancing the men-only jig any longer, I might truly find myself beyond the point of no return. I'd carry on, the rest of my life dictated by the feverish rhythm until I ascended, prophet of my own special sect of celibacy. It was the summer of my third year when the scent of danger grew unbearably oppressive, prompting me to finally break free.

In truth, it still pains me somewhat, recalling that ultimate betrayal of everything I once stood for. But if I must swallow my pride and confess, so be it. Three years into college, I acquired a girlfriend.

The individual in question was a new addition to a certain university sports club to which I belonged.

I was regarded rather harshly by the other members, all but bathed in the contempt of both upper- and underclassmen for being what they perceived as the club idler, a good-for-nothing. And I suppose, looking back, my actions constituted the ultimate abuse of privilege: I was leveraging my station as an established member of the club—along with every other means and device I could fathom—to ensnare her. A few of my friends privy to the situation objected, bitterly criticizing me as having deceived a tender, young first-year student.

Still, to be honest, I was happy.

I was also very nearly ready to spit on myself. For truly, what manner of craven fool glows with pride over merely having secured a girlfriend?

At any rate, the girl's surname was Mizuo.

I imagine I'll come to write more about her eventually. For now, simply know that to me she was and remains the only woman of consequence. It would therefore be impossible to tell my story without mentioning her part. But do not fret, dear readers. I assure you that this record you now hold will not devolve into some manner of repugnant, sappy romance—or any other drivel of that ilk. On that point, you need not worry.

To summarize, Mizuo was intellectual, attractive, outlandish, inconsistent, remarkably catlike, slightly too fond of sleep, and a thoroughly charming person. But regrettably, she had one fatal flaw.

She had made the grave mistake of rejecting me.

I write this record while sitting dead center on a dilapidated four-and-a-half-tatami-mat floor. My intent is to illustrate my humdrum day-to-day. Some of you may protest, adamant that you have no interest in reading about my everyday happenings. Those readers would be wise to set this book down straightaway. They only need glance around to find countless other texts to occupy their time—texts far more accessible, far less taxing, and far more pleasant to read. No predilection can justify delving into this sweaty tome, overflowing with the malodorous musk of man. If you do choose to read through, know that upon completion you will undoubtedly find your own scent to have doubled in intensity. So please, stop now. Say not that I failed to warn

you. If my experience is any measure, a bodily odor once magnified can never again be reined in.
However, those of you who do dare to continue may find my tale a most valuable experience. It may not be a pleasant one, mind, but the best medicine is always bitter.
Then again, bitterness alone does not guarantee a remedy. Poison, too, tastes harsh.

In my lodgings at the base of Mount Hiei, I was hugging my electric heater close for warmth like an old-fashioned hibachi. December had arrived, and the long-fallen autumn foliage of Higashiyama had taken to the wind. The cold of Kyoto would soon reach its penetrating peak, and my squalid residence made a poor fortress to resist General Winter's siege. I was at a distinct disadvantage in this end-of-year confrontation.
I stood and pulled a hefty document storage box from the bookshelf occupying one entire wall of the tiny room. Inside was a thick stack of A4-size paper, words populating each and every page. These were the fruits of my great labors. They represented night after night of clacking away on my keyboard, often in lieu of meals or baths. For a great deal of time now, I had been engaged in a detailed study of Mizuo and all her activities.
The contents of the box represented fourteen full reports, spanning a length equivalent to two hundred and forty typical four-hundred-character pages—a grand treatise by any measure. Once, a great portion of my day had been dedicated to the analysis of genetically engineered crops at my erstwhile lab. Now that time was fully redirected to this ardent study of Mizuo. And that may, admittedly, have contributed to my extended leave of absence from school. But let us set that detail aside for now.
The information I had amassed on Mizuo was multifaceted, collected via careful observation and wild speculation. And I'd masterfully recorded it all in these fourteen works of absolute literary genius.
A year ago, in the cold of that previous December, the reports had still been quite lacking. I required a great deal of time yet to bolster them to a satisfactory degree of completion. But just as I resolved to redouble my efforts, I was issued a unilateral cease and desist by Mizuo herself.

It was an unfortunate turn of events, but I did not lose heart. My conscience would not allow me to abandon such a noble pursuit after I'd already committed myself. And thanks to my great capacity for research, investigation, and fancy, I was perfectly capable of continuing even in the absence of Mizuo's cooperation. I began to pore over every intermittent text message exchanged between us. I secured opportunities to observe her in the wild, both on and off campus.

Of course, it goes without saying that this research fulfilled a secondary purpose. Namely, it allowed me to explore exactly why she had rejected an individual of my caliber. But I assure you, this benefit was entirely incidental.

Long ago, I'd been possessed by the delusion that I was in love. I was no longer in control of the man downstairs. The reins slipped from my hands and it reduced me to a shameful state. I'm sure I made for a very sorry sight to anyone who happened across me at the time.

But I eventually recognized my folly. I saw that allowing myself to be driven by ridiculous notions like love and self-pity were obstructing my ability to conduct calm, rational research, and I quickly severed the emotional bonds that had coiled themselves about me. I finally saw that, to me, Mizuo was not an object of affection. Rather, she was a puzzle. She was one curiosity of many that would dot the road on my journey through life. And as an intellectual, it was only natural for me to express interest and to attempt to unravel her mystery.

Ergo, my present line of research was completely and fundamentally unrelated to the distasteful modern criminal behavior known as stalking. Please allow me to make that point very clear.

Among the reports tucked away in the hefty document storage box was a set of seven A4-size pages strung together with cellophane tape, such that they expanded and collapsed like a folding screen. On these pages was a record of Mizuo's typical daily activities. Each page represented a different day of the week, and my notes were arranged by hour from morning to night. I'd discovered that the life of a diligent college student is very consistent: A quick glance at this document, coupled with some guesswork, was sufficient to determine Mizuo's approximate whereabouts at any given moment. This seven-

page spread had proven itself an indispensable tool on countless occasions, and I referenced it whenever a sudden need to observe her arose.

The present day was a Tuesday. Her fourth-period lecture would conclude just before evening, and after that, she would in all likelihood stop by the student co-op bookstore to peruse the shelves before heading home. On occasion, she would purchase a new volume to add to her collection. She also sometimes went by the supermarket to pick up a few perishables. Other digressions were rare, as even now in her third year, the demands of her foreign language course nagged at her like a stubborn debt collector. She required ample time at home to study and prepare for the following day's lesson.

I checked the clock. It was just before four in the afternoon. Class would be ending in approximately half an hour. Waiting at the bookstore was the obvious course of action.

I began my preparations with gusto, first carefully stretching all my muscle groups. I practiced rapid sidestepping—a remarkably beneficial type of training for those times one needs to duck quickly out of sight.

To be clear, I did not fear being spotted by Mizuo per se. It was simply preferable that I not have any direct contact with my target, to ensure that my observations remained completely impartial.

Once the blood was flowing and my body was limbered up, I grabbed the luxurious scarf that my aunt in Ashiya had sent in a surge of pity at my purportedly half-frozen state. I swept its ends gallantly about my neck and shoulders and headed out into the cold.

My lodgings sat at a considerable elevation in relation to the rest of the city, and my preferred means of transportation down to the streets of Kyoto was my cherished bicycle, Manami. By December, the trip from my lofty palace to the mundane was accompanied by a wind so biting that I often thought it would cleave me in two. Normally, I would have simply avoided going out, sparing myself meaningless pain. But today's outing was for the sake of my research. I could not afford to be selfish.

I have, I believe, the distinguished honor of being the only researcher in the world focused on this particular subject. The most foolish thing a man can do is to fail to take pride in his work. Or to put that another way, if one at least

maintains pride in one’s work, even the most meaningless endeavor becomes something noble. There is no value in allowing your pursuits to be undermined by your own self-doubt or the way others perceive you. Do not waver. Cast not your eyes to the ground. Press forward with unflinching resolve, your chin always held high.

So I followed my own advice. I barreled down the street astride my beloved Manami, my head high, my spirit resolute, my cheeks bearing the full brunt of the chill northern wind.

I followed Mikage Street, making my way into the mundane. But when I reached its intersection with Higashioji Street, where the cold, wintry wind rips freely north to south, I was struck by a most unpleasant sensation. I stopped riding to examine my surroundings more carefully.

At first, nothing seemed amiss. It was the same intersection I’d always known.

Higashioji Street emerges from the neighborhood of Rakuhoku, the northernmost part of Kyoto proper. At first, the street seems determined to cleave southward in a perfectly straight line. But upon reaching Gion Yasaka, it begins to falter, wavering from side to side until its resolve deteriorates so far as to allow a full ninety-degree turn that merges into Kujo Street. In a word, Higashioji is a street I neither care for nor admire. I have had many opportunities to ride along it, and I’ve come to realize I must always be on my guard. Any slight lapse in attention, and there’s no telling where in the city the street might take you.

But my unease about Higashioji on this particular day went beyond the flaws in its design. There was something else wrong. Something more subtle and far more repulsive.

I flicked my eyes to the nearest streetlight. It twinkled with seasonal strings of decorative lights. They were not as lavish as their cousins at the Kobe Luminarie. But neither were they the cheap, flimsy things found wrapped around your typical domestic Christmas tree. I traced the street with my eyes, examining lamppost after lamppost. They were all decorated in the same manner. I gasped and turned back to examine my westerly route. Mikage’s lampposts, too, were strung with lights.

How could this be? I was mortified. The terminal monster, my old foe, had returned. He had waited for the moment my vigilance lapsed to pounce upon

me, and now he was striding ever deeper into my fair city. Christmas was upon us…

I grumbled bitterly to myself. How had the heathen Yule made it to the gates of the Tanaka Shrine, stalwart guardian of this neighborhood of easterly Kyoto? What must the shrine's guardian deity, Okuninushi-no-Mikoto, think of this trespass?

Half of December's days were already stricken from the calendar, so I was well aware of the encroaching whirlwind of Christmas fascism. I'd steeled my heart long before it consumed the vicinity of Shijo Kawaramachi, as it did every year. I always made a point of avoiding that neighborhood after the thirtieth of November. But I could have never imagined that my nemesis had advanced so near as to scrape its claws down Higashioji.

Alas, I do not have time here to enumerate the many faults of Christmas as it is known in modern Japan. I must continue my tale.

The sun was still up, but night's blanket was preparing to descend upon the world. With much chagrin, I took one last look at the twinkling strings of lights, then pedaled on.

When I reached the Hyakumanben intersection—located just in front of Kyoto University—I found it bustling with activity. Cars and pedestrians crowded every scrap of land, everyone scurrying on their way home. The pachinko parlor on the northwest corner blinked its incessant visual chaos. And above all the fuss gaped the early evening sky.

The university co-op bookstore faced Higashioji Street. It was the largest purveyor of texts on campus—and thus a place I knew well and frequented often.

I passed through the automatic sliding doors into the warm interior, remembering that it was here in this very shop that I began formulating my plans to inveigle Mizuo. I'd been standing in an aisle perusing a text when my eyes happened upon her. I was smitten, I suppose you would say, or however you prefer to term that embarrassing state of mental disarray.

Her typical visit to the bookstore was spent wandering among the shelves without a care, like a small, round cat making its way from one water dish to another. Here a sip, there a sip. Once she found a book that caught her

interest, she became completely absorbed, her body a vacant husk as her soul flowed into the pages. It was a quality of hers that I suppose some might find truly enchanting.

Attempting to shake off the memory, I began walking from aisle to aisle, casually casting my gaze about the interior of the bookstore. Occasionally, I plucked some academic tome or other from the shelf, playing the part of the diligent young student. I was alert for any sign of Mizuo, careful to keep my wits about me. But it seemed she had yet to arrive at the shop. I checked my watch. It was not long past four. In all likelihood, she was still in class.

I continued to pick up books and flip through the pages, but I was oblivious to the contents. My mind continued to linger on the past. That's not to say I was daydreaming. Waiting for Mizuo at the bookstore simply evoked a few unpleasant memories that I was forced to confront. It reminded me of the time I'd spent writhing in unproductive worry before our relationship began.

I understand why it was necessary for me to pass through that adolescent stage, puerile as it was. But as someone with an admittedly sensitive disposition, I am unable to think back on those days without risking my composure.

And sure enough, I felt a wave of red assaulting my cheeks there in the bookstore. My hands were still cold from the ride over, so I brought them to my face to douse the flames. I chanted quietly from the *Heart Sutra*, "Go, go across to the other bank!"

And just then, as I stood mumbling to myself and with hands at my cheeks like a shy schoolgirl, someone called out to me.

"What on earth are you doing?"

It was not Mizuo, but rather another former club mate—Lady Uemura.

Privately, I had nicknamed Lady Uemura "the Evil Eye." In twenty-four years on this earth, I had never known another gaze as terrifying as hers. In fact, one of my seventeen personal mantras read, *Let not thy pride be so fragile as to crumble under harsh glare.* Yet Lady Evil Eye always managed to pulverize my pride with astonishing ease.

When our club spent weekends at overnight training camps, my own circle of associates would typically find a corner away from the rest of the group, where

we would wrap ourselves up in whimsical contemplations—a noble art in which we were all quite versed.

Dried squid snacks were our typical fare during these sessions, and one of our number insisted on “cooking” each strip with his cigarette lighter immediately prior to consumption. The aroma of burnt squid and male body odor permeated our vicinity, woven together in beautiful olfactory harmony. I’m sure I needn’t elaborate for you to understand how very pleasant it was. And the heady scent only excited us further, sending our fantasies spiraling off at a frenetic pace, dragging us with them to a completely unfettered mental state.

Enter Lady Evil Eye.

With one brief glance, our piled mountain of contemplation would come crashing down in an instant. A second glare ground the resulting rubble so thoroughly that it evaporated into thin air. How is one to maintain any shred of pride in the face of such hegemony? Under the harsh light of Lady Uemura’s eyes, we were but shy maidens of fourteen in the Taisho Era. Each of us grew meeker than the most timid lamb.

I had a great hatred for that stare of hers and the way it left my compatriots and me in a state of abject cowardice. That hatred had in turn prompted me to devise the private moniker. However, the bestowing of such an alias in the secrecy of my mind had obviously had no effect on the lady herself.

I had often asked myself why her gaze held such power over us. It was true that Lady Uemura’s eyes were, anatomically speaking, quite large. But there had to be more to it. If uncharacteristically large eyes were enough to unnerve us, we would tremble every time we happened across a globe eye goldfish.

At any rate, every time I felt her staring, I wished desperately to scream aloud, “Please! No more! Stop looking at me!”

But because such a statement would undoubtedly come across as submissive, I instead stood straight and tall, as if I had a bamboo ruler taped to my spine. I mustered all the strength I could to maintain a facade of calm. When the Evil Eye came near, I had no choice but to draw my own blade and meet her head-on—and I do not choose that phrasing lightly. Lady Uemura’s gaze was a thing so terrifying, no other description could suffice.

Having interrupted me, Lady Uemura continued, “The year-end party. Have you heard the plan?”
“No. I have not.”
“It’s probably happening sometime after the twenty-sixth. I’m trying to find out what date works best for everyone in the club. When are you free?”
“I’m available anytime.”
“You aren’t going home for the holidays?”
“Not until New Year’s Eve.”
“I see.”
She nodded and glanced at her schedule book. “It’s looking like pretty much everyone will be there. That is, except those close to graduating. The job hunt gets pretty busy this time of year.”
She smiled at me. It was a probing smile: one that hoped to drag some embarrassing tidbit from me, analyze it, and crush it to pieces. This was Lady Evil Eye, after all.
“What are you up to?” she inquired.
“I’d like to ask you the same.”
“I’m here to study.”
“Me too.”
“Let me guess. You’re filling your mind with useless facts again.”
“Plenty of distinguished men have staked their entire careers on the seemingly trivial.”
“Tell me something. Is it always smoke and mirrors with you?”
“Not at all.”
I caught the glint of her evil eye. I prayed I’d be able to piece together some clever excuse if she pressed—anything to deflect her gaze. But I could already hear the tinkling of my shattered pride upon the cold, hard ground. I was backed into a corner. In the end, I could conceive no better plan than to avert my own eyes and offer a desultory chuckle.
Worse still, I’d continued to glance about the bookstore as we conversed.
“Meeting someone here?” she prodded.
“Beg pardon?”
I was terrified anew. How was she so perceptive? How many days and nights had she spent honing her intuition to end up as she was now? What mythical

polishing agent conferred such a razor-sharp edge? If I didn't slip away soon, there was no telling what she'd unearth and what kind of tragicomedy might unfold.

Desperate to flee her enchanted gaze, I offered a weak attempt to sever the interaction. "Uh, so I'll see you around."

"Expect a text from me," she responded.

And with that, I left Lady Uemura's side.

Her evil eye, however, seemed to linger. I found myself unable to calm my nerves and quickly realized I was no longer in any state to conduct my usual research. I was liable to commit a fatal blunder that could make all my hard work go up in smoke.

But all was not lost. Eventually, Mizuo would have to make her way home. I decided it would be safer to observe her during her journey, rather than here at the bookstore, and so I took my leave.

Mizuo's building was situated next to Mototanaka Station, on the main line of the Eizan Electric Railway. It was in the Minami Nishi Ura neighborhood, a place where narrow alleyways twisted and turned in incomprehensible knots. In stark contrast to my little castle, a dingy corner room in a two-story, half-derelict wooden structure, Mizuo lived in a brand-new studio apartment in a six-floor reinforced-concrete building. Each unit was furnished with its own private commode and even a personal bathtub to boot.

It had a secure lobby; visitors could not pass through the inner doors without first being buzzed in. That, too, was a world of difference from mine, freely accessible twenty-four hours a day. The doors of my building remained wide open as almost a matter of pride, allowing anyone inside, no matter who they were. For someone as averse to social interaction as me, choosing to live in such insecure lodgings was evidence of my noble character.

However, I could admit that for a young woman living on her own in this morally depraved world, a heavily fortified apartment was a bare minimum. Who knew when a stalker or some other deplorable might creep out of the shadows? Given the risk, perhaps even greater security was called for. Of course, further safety precautions could be suggested without end. But of the potential improvements that could be made to Mizuo's building, I would opine

that at least a doorman was in order, if not ten or twenty. Why, I'd be willing to stand watch every hour of every day myself, but it's not as if I'm a layabout. Regrettably, I am already engaged in a multitude of projects that sap all my time.

Once I had arrived, I situated myself next to a van parked along the street. The spot offered an excellent view of Mizuo's typical route, allowing me to ensure her safe arrival home. I pulled out my cell phone, skillfully playing the part of a young twentysomething vexed over a friend running fifteen minutes late.

Dusk's segue to night had grown more rapid over the past several weeks. Before I knew it, the sun was all but completely under the horizon, and my loitering was growing ever more inappropriate. If I stayed much longer, I'd draw suspicion from passersby. On the other hand, the cover of darkness would minimize my risk of being spotted by Mizuo.

I looked to my right, where the tracks of the Eizan main line stretched to the northeast. Just beyond, they would intersect with Higashioji Street, and from there, they would head toward Ichijoji.

The Eizan's tracks pierce straight through Kyoto, causing it to resemble a streetcar more than a railway. Sometimes, when I wander aimlessly through the city, one of its trains will abruptly cut straight across my vision, almost as if it has left its tracks and is sliding freely through the jumbled urban landscape. In the darkness, it becomes a glowing box on wheels, carrying a whole bright world all its own.

Every time I spot one at night, I fantasize about hopping aboard, unplanned and ticketless. I'd simply ride to wherever it took me. I'm terribly fond of the Eizan. But in five years of Kyoto life, I can still count on one hand the number of times I've been aboard.

A two-car train appeared, rolling along the tracks toward Mizuo's building. It was now very dark out, which only served to emphasize the cars' bright interior. The instant the train passed, I caught a glimpse of Lady Uemura inside, gently swaying from side to side as she clutched an overhead hand strap.

She glared in my direction. I stiffened momentarily, and my heart threatened to race, but I hushed it, reasoning that surely the sighting was a figment of my

imagination. Lady Uemura lived in the southernmost reaches of the city. She had no reason to be riding the Eizan at this time of day. Obviously, I hadn't *actually* seen her.

Truth be told, this was a frequent experience. Every time her evil eye landed upon me, its effects remained for some time afterward. It seemed to chase me, accosting me with flashbacks as I went about my business. When I was particularly engrossed in my contemplations, I'd suddenly feel her eyes lurking, watching me from the shadows of the hallway or the space behind the television, and I'd jump in surprise. Passersby with no connection to Lady Uemura whatsoever would abruptly glare at me, their eyes replaced by hers. In particularly horrid instances, I would see dozens of tiny eyes pop open on my ceiling, and they would all glare at me in unison. It was extremely unnerving.

Most troubling was the great and inexplicable sense of shame I felt whenever Lady Evil Eye drew near. No matter how fervently I'd been engaged in my erudite contemplations or what great progress I'd been making, my will to continue withered in her presence. I filled with boiling anger instead. Why should a formidable individual such as myself be forced to tremble under the eyes of a young, female college student? But the anger served for naught. I was still powerless, unable to do anything but hold my breath and wait for the threat to pass. Didn't she realize the harm she was causing? Her frequent interruptions were delaying my inevitable self-perfection. It was a loss that would reverberate throughout all society. The next time I saw Lady Uemura, I would need to steel myself and attempt to discuss the matter directly. Really, I had nothing to fear. My enemy was but a pair of eyes—though popular wisdom does admittedly hold that eyes may speak volumes.

Her perceptiveness at the bookstore still nagged at me. It seemed that Lady Uemura might be vaguely aware of my history with Mizuo. As an intellectual and someone ever striving to supplant emotion with rational thought, I have utmost confidence in my ability to conceal any juvenile sentiment that might occasionally manifest inside me. But I had spent four years' worth of club functions in close proximity to Lady Uemura. Considering her incredible acuity —thoroughly honed over however many patient years with whatever mythical polishing agent she had at her disposal—it was quite possible that she had

picked up on some tiny mannerisms and deduced the foolish emotions I was hiding.

I will freely admit that, at one time, I allowed an irrational thought to get the better of me. But it was only for a fleeting moment, and it would trouble me greatly to think that others based their impressions of me entirely on that one fleeting episode. If it could be done, I would have liked to attempt to convince Lady Uemura of her erroneous assumptions, perhaps by penning a very thorough and persuasive paper on the topic.

Still trembling under the threat of the Evil Eye, I continued my wait. I imagined Mizuo straddling her bicycle, speeding along the city streets toward home. She stared forward intently, pumping the pedals with such ferocity that anyone watching would feel compelled to ask her what the emergency was.

Frankly, I worried for her safety. Who knew if she was spotting the telephone poles and vending machines on the sidewalk as she hurtled along? She had a recklessness about her—and a tendency to leave herself wide open to misfortune. When you make your way through life like that, there's no telling what might happen to you.

I would have liked to see her work on improving her general awareness, but given our current relationship, I was hardly in any position to offer advice.

Another quirk of hers was the way she smiled. From time to time and for no apparent reason, her lips would curl ever so slightly, even when she was all by herself. I had no idea what she found so pleasant and thought the behavior most perplexing. But I suppose there may be men who find it charming.

I waited and waited, but Mizuo did not show. Thinking perhaps her arrival had preceded my own, I circled around back to the parking lot and peered up at her window. No lights were on.

"Perhaps she headed over to the bookstore in Takano," I mumbled to myself.

I'd been standing outside so long that the cold had penetrated me from head to toe. I shivered, and just as I did so, a shadow emerged from the dark of the parking lot and slinked toward me.

It was a man. His face caught the glint of the streetlights, but I did not recognize him.

"I'll call the cops on you."

His voice bordered on a low growl, but I saw immediately how little substance was behind it. Still, I had to account for the slight possibility of error in my judgment; there was a minuscule chance that he was actually as formidable as the character he made himself out to be. So I decided to respond to his insolence with caution and courtesy—and to watch how things played out. Meanwhile, my legs were taut as bowstrings, ready to launch into instant retreat if the need arose. I was quite impressed with my nimble response, both in body and in mind.

"I'm sorry? I don't understand," I said.

"Quit following her around, or I'll call the cops."

Whoever he was, he had clearly mistaken me for some nitwit obsessed with following Mizuo around. An insult of the highest order.

I felt a surge of anger over this stranger's rude accusation, but I maintained my outward cool, knowing there was no need to stoop to his level. He hadn't even offered his name.

"I believe you're mistaken as to why I am here."

"Cut the crap."

"I beg your pardon," I replied, now slightly raising my voice. "I've no idea who you are, sir, but I refuse to be spoken to in this manner."

"Yeah? Well I know *exactly* who you are. So if you don't back off, you're gonna end up in handcuffs. There are laws against this kinda stuff, you know."

"I demand to know who you are."

"Well, I'm not gonna tell ya," he snapped. "Look. She's sick of you following her around, so I came here to warn you. That's all you need to know."

"Warn me for what? I haven't done anything wrong!"

"I'm serious," he said, jabbing his index finger in my direction. "Keep this up, and I really will call the cops."

I stared, carefully examining the man's face under the harsh fluorescent white of the streetlights. He didn't exhibit the babyish features of a first-year student. But neither did he possess the mature, worldly countenance of a fifth-year like me. Since he claimed to be an acquaintance of Mizuo's, I had to assume he was in his third year—a hapless, middling sort of age.

His eyes were narrow and cold, but one would be hard-pressed to describe them as sharp. They flicked to and fro restlessly, like a child's. I could tell immediately that he had less than a hundredth of the visual acuity of Lady Uemura. The thinness of his lips hadn't escaped my notice, either. They trembled slightly as he expelled his harsh admonishments. His brows, too, were a bit sparser than average—but out of compassion, I decided to refrain from dwelling on that particular shortcoming.

His nose, I could admit, was quite masculine and well proportioned. But it, too, spoiled his appearance, as it only emphasized the deficiencies of his other features.

Allow me to be quite clear: I do not nitpick his facial construction as a means to vent my irritations. I'm not one to assert that a person's inner makeup is in any way defined by external appearance. No doubt there are some great men in this world with facial structures not much different than his. Rather, I wish to point out that had he not exuded an overwhelming smallness and lack of refinement, I might have disregarded his unpleasant appearance entirely. As it was, his behavior warped and magnified his faults, such that his verbal affront was compounded by visual insult.

Based on an overall inventory of his looks and the clues there afforded, I concluded that his capacity as an individual was likely less than a tenth of my own. The gap between us was so overwhelmingly apparent that I knew that the most appropriate course of action would be to ignore him and quit the encounter. I had no reason to waste my time exchanging words with such a pathetic specimen.

However, there were a few other things I had to take into account. If he was indeed an acquaintance of Mizuo's, there was a fair likelihood that he was also enrolled in the Faculty of Law. Preparations for the bar exam were famously labyrinthine, such that an average individual would be half transformed into a husk of his former self whilst navigating the infernal maze. But he could still conceivably possess enough knowledge of the law to outmatch a novice such as myself. Given his earlier, ungentlemanly accusations, this fear was probably unfounded. However, he could be laying a trap, waiting for some criminal or tortious misstep on my part, providing the opening he needed to unleash some decisive legal combo attack. Perhaps he intended to outargue me, perform a

citizen’s arrest, and then drag me to the police station himself. This could prove problematic. Convincing the ordinary populace of my research’s importance was one thing, but even I lacked the confidence that my compelling arguments would satisfy the authorities.

I was incensed. It was humiliating to think that this individual—this man whose intellectual capacity couldn’t fill a kitten’s milk bowl—might have the final word in our exchange. But in the end, I concluded that disengagement was indeed the best course. I would magnanimously take his shortcomings into account and spare him my wrath.

He stood before me, as if ready to block my exit. But when I made to depart, he pulled away from me with a gasp and leaped backward. Once he realized I only intended to leave, he shouted weakly after me, “You hear me?!”

His relief betrayed his true nature. He had the composure and opacity of a wet tissue.

“I mean it!” he persisted. “You better stay away from her!”

I thrust a hand into my coat pocket, where my trusty digital camera waited, ready for action. After a few more steps of feigned retreat, I abruptly stopped and spun around. I aimed the lens at his face and snapped the shutter. He recoiled, a soldier under fire from an enemy blunderbuss. It made a fine impromptu counterattack, I decided, against a stranger who refused to state his name while branding me a criminal.

The candid photograph ignited a storm of anger and unease in his eyes. But he lacked the courage to lunge and wrest the camera from my hands. He simply dithered.

Assuming that any further interaction would only prove a hassle, I then executed my escape plan, pumping my legs as hard as I could in a swift skedaddle. I heard him shout after me once more, with a strained “Get back here!” But I paid it no mind. It was the vain protestation of a defeated man.

The sun now sat deep below the horizon, ushering in the inevitable twinkling of Christmas lights all across the city. The paper lanterns at the Tanaka Shrine flickered in the distance, but even their warm orange glow offered little solace in this world of garish white.

I did my best to avoid the frivolous seasonal decorations, traversing dim alleyways toward home. In my anger, I'd departed the scene without my beloved bicycle. Manami still sat parked in front of Mizuo's building. I'd have to return again the following day to reclaim her.

As I trudged along, my breath came out in harsh bursts, opaque. The sight summoned another, belated surge of anger: I felt my fury at Mizuo rekindle and mix in with that for the unnamed man. I knew I should not allow such sentimental nonsense to rule my mind, but I still found myself lodged deeply in its bog.

Damn that man, whoever he was. He was undoubtedly relating the evening's encounter to her at that very moment, a proud knight boasting of his heroic deeds. He'd conveniently leave out the part where he quivered before me like a dish of egg tofu, painting instead a scene of unblemished gallantry. He had convinced me to see the error of my ways, he'd claim, after which I'd prostrated myself before him and begged for forgiveness.

"It's all right now," he'd reassure her. "He won't be bothering you anymore. And if he does, I'll just run him off again."

On and on he'd gloat, chest puffed and shoulders wide as he sat cross-legged on the floor of her apartment, sipping tomato juice. He was the type of man who reeked of self-restraint—only a little alcohol, no smoking. Unthinkable.

But even more than him, I couldn't bring myself to forgive *her*.

A year ago, just prior to Christmas Day, Mizuo had unilaterally brought our relationship to an end. It came quite out of the blue. However, as a gentleman who holds himself in the highest regard, I, of course, remained calm. I allowed no trace of my dismay to slip, despite her merciless rejection, and I graciously withdrew from our social arrangement. After our final conversation in my abode, we cordially shook hands and went our separate ways. Not every man is capable of so honorable an end.

It helped that I recognized the reason for her error. Her dumping me was inevitable. She had been forced to deny me because she was unable to grasp my true greatness. And there was no shame in that. We all have our limits. That was precisely why I allowed things to end so amicably. It was why I'd been able to discard any remaining feelings I might have had for her and easily return to single life. My continued studies of her are most certainly not based in any kind

of lingering attachment. I have always conducted my research in a calm, detached, and chivalrous manner. I've never sent her disturbing, unsigned letters. I've never called her from a pay phone and remained silent on the line. I've never spread injurious rumors about her among our peer group. I would never engage in such foolish, fruitless behavior. So there was absolutely no reason for her to embarrass me by employing the services of that pathetic man. If anything, she should be offering me thanks for all I've done.

My feet began to slam against the asphalt with each step. My breathing grew heavy, and the accompanying puffs of white only grew more heated. I imagined I must have looked like a steam locomotive chugging along the street. I continued on like that through the quiet residential district of Kitashirakawa, my smokestack's long white cloud trailing behind. I spotted a girl standing at the front gate of her home, likely having just returned in time for dinner. When she saw me, her expression stiffened, and as she dashed the few remaining steps to safety, I heard her start to bawl.

Eventually, I rejoined Mikage Street, just past the intersection at Kitashirakawa Betto.

From there, Mikage begins to climb before ultimately narrowing into a tiny, winding mountain road known locally as Yamanaka Pass, which continues all the way to Lake Biwa. The dilapidated building in which I resided was located just beyond the end of Mikage Street proper, where the road was at its narrowest, beginning its elongated climb into the mountains and eventual transformation into Yamanaka Pass.

When heading out to purchase cigarettes on weekend nights, I'd often catch sight of cars zipping up into the mountains, like close encounters of another kind. Given the strange roar of the engines and the otherworldly glow of their pearlescent white exteriors, I could only surmise that their drivers were rushing to the mountaintop to swap signals with Alpha Centaurians. Mercifully, my own room was located at the very back of my building, so the racket generated by such lawless degenerates rarely interrupted my contemplations.

When I reached my building, I ascended its short concrete stairway to the front entrance, glancing at the flickering gate lamps to my side. I opened the door to find the interior pitch-black. This was not surprising. The building was more or

less self-managed, the tenants themselves responsible for turning the hallway lights on or off as needed or desired. Some days, when we'd all decided we didn't have the energy to spare, the entire building remained bathed in darkness all through the night. Frankly, the structure was quite nearly derelict. And as if its sad state wasn't enough, recent years had also seen a sharp decline in occupancy. New pairs of sneakers were scarcely ever found in the shoe cubby in the entryway, and the shredded specimens left by previous tenants sat festering and fermenting in their own savory fungal colonies, tendrils unfurling in intricate geometrical patterns. It was but one more contribution to the building's depressingly decrepit appearance.

Run-ins with other residents were nonexistent. Among typical social groups, a smaller number is usually thought to correlate with tighter bonds among its members. But the modern-day college students inhabiting this run-down building seemed intent on avoiding contact to whatever extent possible, and that trend only grew more pronounced as our numbers dwindled.

By that point, the only indications I had of other tenants were the occasional bangs of unseen doors opening and closing. Truthfully, there was no way to be certain the noises were produced by human hands and not those of spirits. Ultimately, I had no hard evidence that anyone other than myself actually lived in the building at all. I personally saw this as a positive, for the constant cloying sense of others drifting about me like departed souls allowed me to steep myself in an ever keener sense of solitude.

I made my way down the hallway, slowing when I became aware of a shadowy figure squatting in front of the door to my room.

As I cautiously drew nearer, I realized it was a *maneki-neko*.

I imagine many of you have at some point seen a *tanuki* figurine, typically fashioned from Shigaraki stoneware and resting outside a soba joint or similar establishment. They're curious objects, usually with a sake jug dangling from one hand and an account book from the other, along with an absurdly large pair of testicles between their legs. They always seem to stare down passersby with inexplicable, wide-eyed hostility. Occasionally, the things are more statue than figurine, towering over you like the muscular guardians found at a temple's gates. Come to think of it, the largest *tanuki* are probably just the

right size to squash two or three unsuspecting children if tipped over. In any case, I've always found *tanuki* statues quite mysterious. They strike me as a bit irritating—and also a bit delightful.

A *maneki-neko*—a lucky cat, if you will—is an equally common sight. Yet these are rarely fashioned as towering monstrosities the way *tanuki* sometimes are.

The *maneki-neko* resting outside my door was, without question, the largest specimen I'd laid eyes on in all my twenty-four years. A cat of this size wouldn't just be pulling in a few extra customers and bits of loose change with its monstrous upheld paw; it occurred to me that it might bring everything under the sun rushing in, from uninvited guest to terrible calamity. It had a horrible magnificence about it, like a stout, bossy mother, large and in charge, ready to take on anything the world might throw at her.

Uncertain what else to do, I opened the door and began dragging the statue into my tiny four-and-a-half-mat abode. Once it rested in the middle, I stood peering into its eyes, my own face still frozen in abject shock. Where on earth had it come from?

It was inert, of course. Yet it seemed to pulse with life, a great and intimidating presence that dwarfed my own. I feared that at any moment it might stretch open its terrible maw and swallow me whole.

I was still standing there like a toad before a mirror, greasy sweat sliding down my skin, when a knock came at the door. In a daze, I turned and opened it to find Shikama, a big grin on his face.

"I've got a dreamball," he announced. "I'm going to break it open, and I want you to bear witness."

And with that, he thrust a blue orb before my eyes.

That was how the two of us found ourselves digging through the detritus of a dreamball on a long December night.

A dreamball, for those unfamiliar, is a letter to one's future self, balled up in clay to form a crude time capsule. Typically, they are fashioned in childhood, the letter composed of things one might wish to say to oneself at age twenty, the ball then sealed away. It's a rather saccharine tradition.

This dreamball in particular had been fashioned by my brother-in-arms, Daiki Shikama, during his junior high school days. On a recent visit to his parents'

home, he'd discovered it among various embarrassing mementos of his past unceremoniously dumped into a cardboard box for safekeeping. The dreamball had remained unopened, Shikama having completely forgotten of its existence. Now here he was, long past the intended age of twenty, asking me to sit in as he completed the ritual, claiming that cracking the ball open on his own would offer a rather dull experience.

In truth, I suspected he wanted me there because he was frightened. Once the dreamball was open, a torrent of sentimentalism would doubtless spring forth, and Shikama was terrified of getting swept up in the current. We were brothers of a pact, having sworn off frivolities like base emotion and romantic longing, determined to live our days grounded in reality. But as children of men, we were vulnerable to assault. The mere concept of a dreamball was laden with the aroma of danger. It threatened to pierce the most sensitive regions of the soul without warning.

Imagine for a moment that you yourself are sitting down to break open a dreamball carefully crafted and stored away since adolescence. You're alone. It's just you and your past. The thought itself is upsetting enough to have you begging for a syringe of local anesthetic jabbed directly into your psyche. You know that if you allow the episode to sweep you away and send bittersweet tears streaming down your cheeks, you'll be unable to forgive yourself for a quarter century hence.

Thus, when Shikama realized he'd be forced to face his past self, it was only natural that he sought my presence to act as an emotional brace. I instinctively curled my right hand into a loose fist, preparing for the worst. I was ready to wallop my friend across the room the instant his heart was seized by the talons of the past.

The dreamball was roughly the size of a softball. Across its baked white exterior was a chaotic pattern of indigo swirls. It was an eerie design, no doubt reflecting the inner turmoil Shikama had borne in adolescence.

I spread a sheet of newspaper across the tatami floor, and Shikama tossed the dreamball down with a heavy thunk.

"What if it's so awful that I can't even laugh it off?" he murmured.

"Have you forgotten what you wrote?"

“I think it was probably something about going to America and getting a license to fly helicopters. I mean, I was in junior high school.”
“Right. Well, let’s get to it.”
Wielding a rusty pair of pliers, Shikama began whacking the dreamball to no avail. It refused to break. It occurred to me that the dream sealed away inside must be quite steadfast. Each time Shikama raised the pliers high above his head for the subsequent blow, a fine mist of white clay danced in the air about him.
When the ball finally did split, after a great deal of effort, the surrounding tatami was littered with alabaster dust. Inside was a tiny film canister. With all the care of an archaeologist handling a rare artifact, Shikama popped the lid and extracted a torn bit of discolored paper.
I remained at his side, observing my friend’s confrontation with the sunny dreams he’d had for himself in tender adolescence. The message had been composed at age fourteen, written to an imagined self of age twenty, now read at age twenty-three. The pit of my stomach squirmed. What a godforsaken sight.
Without warning, Shikama broke into a great fit of laughter.
He roared on for some time and was gasping for breath when he finally exclaimed, “This isn’t my dream!”
Inwardly, I sighed. I understood his reaction. Who of us doesn’t long to deny the full scope of our junior high foolishness made apparent in such a dream? When confronted by our stark naked pasts, do we not all avert our eyes?
But the heights we reach today are only achieved by scrambling atop the sediment of our past failures. Just as modern civilization is powered by the remains of ancient life compressed over hundreds of millennia into oil, so too are we obliged to pump the shameful idiocy of our pasts into our engines of the soul if we wish to sally forth into the future. Doing so requires boldly coming to terms with our adolescent selves, fully bared. As indeed, without first extracting the oil buried deep underground, we could not have produced the dizzying array of plastic products now destroying the environment with such gleeful abandon.
“No, no. I’m telling you this isn’t even my handwriting.”
He thrust the discolored fragment before my eyes.

He was right. What I saw was not Shikama's handwriting at all. And the content of the wish itself was something I could hardly imagine from him—this same friend of mine who, upon admission to the private academy in Osaka where he would spend his junior high and high school years, is said to have marched three steps forward, pointed one finger to the sky and another to the ground, and proclaimed the same words as the infant Siddhartha, "Throughout heaven and earth, I alone am the honored one." Everything I've heard suggests that he followed through with that claim, too, expanding his authority until the entire student body was at his beck and call.

I read the scrap of paper aloud.

"One. Get a spot on the Kyoto University baseball team and win the triple crown. Two. Find a normal job after graduation, meet someone I get along with, and get married."

"That's the most boring dream I've ever heard!" Shikama announced.

To which I responded, "You do know this means the dreamball you've been looking after for nearly a decade belongs to somebody *else*."

All that heroic resolution he'd mustered to square off against his past self had nowhere to go. It could only spin aimlessly inside him. I could tell at once that he was fraught with excess thoughts and adrenaline.

"I just realized what happened," he blurted, face contorted in shock. "After we finished the project in class, we put the dreamballs on display at the school festival. When it was over, we were supposed to collect our own ball and take it home. But there were several that all looked the same, and I wasn't sure which was mine. It must have gotten mixed up with someone else's. Good god! Whose dream do I have? Which one of my classmates wrote this drivel?!"

Now he was ranting furiously, all but boiling over with rage. But in the depths of his words, I sensed a melancholy he could not dispel.

We sat like that, two young men uncertain what to do, shivering in a rapidly chilling four-and-a-half-mat room on a dark winter night, clutching the wish of an unknown third party that was already several years past its expiration.

"How can this be?" muttered Shikama forlornly. "I've lost my dream."

Allow me to enlighten you on the subject of Daiki Shikama, the man who lost his dream.

The two of us came to know each other upon joining that same university sports club earlier mentioned.

Among the initial pages of this record, I believe I described how a select group of my male peers and I labored in earnest, gorging ourselves on contemplation and fancy as we aspired to ever greater heights. The man standing at the head of that desperate folk dance was Daiki Shikama.

He was our champion. In all our endeavors, he led the charge, running at such a maniacal pace that it was honestly a bit cruel to expect anyone to keep up. And in a certain sense, I suppose it was a blessing *not* to be able to match him step for step.

Nonetheless, three of us did manage to stay on Shikama's heels, if only barely. There was Tomonao Takayabu, the steel-whiskered, gentle giant; Kouhei Ido, the very embodiment of worldly jealousy; and of course, yours truly.

We four were the elite, constantly bathed in the disdain and bewilderment of our club associates, both junior and senior. We coronated ourselves the Four Heavenly Kings, and we brandished the fruits of our shrewd fantasies openly, all too happy to garner further incredulity from the unenlightened masses.

As for Takayabu and Ido, I expect that over the course of this record I will be obliged to introduce them in greater detail, whether I wish to or not. I only ask for your patience—and that you not set your expectations too high. All will come in due course, dear readers.

That said, let us return to Shikama.

After graduating from the aforementioned academy in Osaka, he came to study at Kyoto University's Faculty of Law, where he held himself proud and aloof. Ever a legal text clutched to his chest, he milled about the alleyways of Hyakumanben, completely devoting himself to the tempering of his intellect. He could rattle off obscure legal precedents with ease, vigorously describing why, for example, the legally protected status of a giant flying squirrel depended entirely upon the local dialect of hunters near the forest it called home.

In short, Shikama had a frighteningly sharp mind for detail, and he wasted his talents in a fashion so ostentatious that no one else could ever hope to keep up.

In the spring of his second year, Shikama was overcome with a vague, Akutagawa-esque sense of unease about the future. He announced his

retirement from the club, along with his intent to undergo a complete overhaul and inject a dash of color into his until-then barren life. In the end, he managed neither. The failure predictably led to his stagnation. He languished in place, his lips pouring out an ever greater stream of grumbling about his lonely state.

However, you would be sorely mistaken to assume that Shikama's departure from the club weakened the bonds we shared. Even after he was gone, he continued to reign as our ideological leader.

The four of us cursed Christmas, denounced Saint Valentine, and scorned the cozy couples spaced at perfect intervals along the banks of the Kamo River. We shoved our way past the boisterous, yukata-clad young lovers enjoying the Gion Festival and spat at the wistful romance of the autumn leaves at Kiyomizu Temple. Our months and years in Kyoto were spent constantly on the move, always beset by terrible mental anguish. We stood defiant against the general merrymaking of society.

But for all our valiant efforts, no one seemed to recognize our struggle. Our foe was too great and our band of brothers too small in number.

Shikama resided in the Asukai neighborhood, where he shared an apartment with his younger sister, who was an undergrad in the Faculty of Engineering. I had never met the sister, and all I knew of her came from Shikama. From what I gathered, she was a no-nonsense kind of girl who loved to delve into the collected works of Nietzsche. She also had a very peculiar sensitivity to language—namely, an excessive sense of embarrassment about certain words. For example, she insisted that no one utter the term *freckle* in her presence. So when Shikama became frustrated with her for whatever reason, he would chase her around the apartment, shouting, "Freckle! Freckle! Freckle!" It was a routine which, by all accounts, she found exceedingly distressing.

The sister's perception of me was apparently quite warped, having come to know of my person and exploits exclusively through the dark, twisted prism that was her brother. It seemed she and I would go on like that, never meeting in person and never gaining the opportunity to amend the mistaken mental images we'd formed of each other.

Presently, Shikama was in limbo. Having failed the essay portion of this year's bar exam, he was forced to wait until next year to reattempt. He was already grappling with a rather gloomy outlook on life, and this setback only worsened

his plight. He'd bent to the point of snapping, and now he was distending into some incomprehensible fourth-dimensional object. To further compound his misery, we were fast approaching the fifth Christmas since our college careers began. Shikama's store of patience for the outside world was running thin.
He'd come to my home to open the dreamball as a pleasant distraction from the looming holiday, only to be slapped in the face by a preposterous mix-up. It was the final blow to his already tattered spirit.

In commemoration of Shikama's lost dream, we began to drink.
We scarfed down slices of deep-fried tofu warmed in my toaster oven and slurped on strips of dried squid.
Being men of moderation, neither of us had ever drunk to the point of blackout. We toed the line and quickly backed off, retreating to the commode as necessary to regurgitate any excess. Too many students in this world drink without a proper grasp on their body's capacity to process ethanol—or even a basic understanding of when to retreat to the porcelain pit. I might have found that fact lamentable, but as a student myself, I merely found it unforgivable. Anyone who honestly intends to extol alcohol as the greatest panacea life offers should be ready and willing to slurp up his own misfired vomit after spewing it all over the steps of his local *izakaya*.
Shikama reached an arm around the great *maneki-neko* in the center of my room. He patted it lightly, a grin like the monk Budai's spreading across his face.
"Why on earth did you bring that here?" I demanded.
"My sister found it. I want you to take custody of it."
"Don't be absurd."
"Come on. You love *maneki-neko*."
I clicked my tongue and responded, "I prefer not to clutter my room with unnecessary belongings."
I swallowed my indignation at this flagrant dredging up of past wounds, and we continued to drink like gentlemen. Our conversation grew unrestrained, freewheeling, bounding across every topic that crossed our collective imagination until it threatened to spin entirely out of control. This was a place

safe from the Evil Eye. We needn't hold back. We could gorge our intellects as we pleased.

Soon we had lost the reins, and we paused, asking each other what it was we'd just been talking about, and the search for that answer sparked debate anew. As we argued, we digressed to other topics, ultimately unable to succeed even in retracing our own steps.

"I wonder what he's up to right now," Shikama said. His thoughts had turned back to the true owner of the dreamball. "I wonder if things are turning out the way he planned."

"Who knows?"

"Think about it. While I was writing out nonsense about helicopter pilot licenses, he was envisioning his future. By now, he's sure to have found a girl he gets along with. He may have even secured that normal job he was pining for. Hell, for all we know, he might even be married by now. And maybe—though I hate to even imagine it—he's found something resembling *happiness* in life."

"It's certainly possible," I said.

Shikama let out an anguished groan. A dribble of saliva rolled from one corner of his mouth.

"Damn him," he cursed.

And with that, he went to lie down on the cold tatami floor and wrapped himself tight in his jacket. For a time, he mumbled to himself. I caught occasional phrases, like "give it back," "mine," "my dream," and "get your hands off of it." Then he tossed and turned on the floor, as if trying to squirm from reality's grip. Finally, he grew still.

Now alone, I puffed on a cigarette and booted up my computer. I brought the evening's photographs up on the monitor, flicking through them until I was staring at the man who had slandered me. He stared back, mouth half agape in a witless stupor, a ratty patch of whiskers sprouting at his chin.

Who in the blazes was he? How had the world begot such a meddlesome boor? His base attempt at a threat still rang in my ears like the yapping of a tiny dog. He was a *taiyaki* pastry stuffed from head to tail with disgusting, exasperating

bean paste. I could not understand why a person of Mizuo's fine standing had chosen to associate with the likes of him.

Truth be told, I'd believed her still single. It was shortsighted of me, and I was willing to own up to my naïveté. But for her to run from my arms to throw herself at a disgusting brute like him… It was hard for me to bear the revelation calmly. A year ago, when she dumped me, I'd despaired for her sake, knowing it was an ineluctable blunder stemming from her poor judge of character. But my despair on discovering this new beau was far deeper, for it meant that, in her mind, both he and I were of equal stature. It was a clear affront to a rare genius such as myself. And to add further insult, she had dispatched him to criticize my behavior in her stead.

I do not write these things to garner my readers' sympathy—though, I feel assured anyone could sympathize with such a situation. I simply mean to clarify beyond any doubt that Mizuo and her sycophantic suitor were the ones lacking basic human decorum, not I. Quite frankly, this turn of events had caused my opinion of Mizuo to plummet like stocks in the autumn of '29.

I sat there, huffing and puffing on my cigarette, trembling with rage, when my thoughts were interrupted by a sudden inquiry.

"Who's that?"

Shikama had pulled himself to his feet and was now staring over my shoulder.

I related in great detail the inhumane slander I'd endured from the man on the monitor.

To Shikama, newly stripped of his dreams for adulthood, my story struck a nerve. It seemed to arouse a great storm of pity. His eyes gleamed—and this was a man who very rarely displayed any hint of emotion.

"Absolutely inexcusable," he announced. "By insulting you, this rake has insulted me as well."

I reflected that, in truth, that wasn't necessarily the case. But I wasn't about to turn away a willing hand in my upcoming venture. So I nodded vigorously and explained to Shikama that I had yet to ascertain the identity of the individual on-screen.

"Well, he's probably a law student," Shikama concluded. "Sit tight. I'll look into it."

The stranger's attack on me had been most foul. It called for divine retribution, and we would be the gods' hands. I should emphasize here that I only sought justice. We were acting as the agents of karma, and our plans were in no way related to some warped romantic longing or personal grudge on my part. My primary desire was to save these two from their own arrogance. I longed to lead them to enlightenment so they could thereafter resume life as moral, conscientious human beings.

I related as much to Shikama, who agreed wholeheartedly.

"Naturally," he said. "The two of them are fundamentally mistaken. There's obviously no way that we could be in the wrong."

"And it is our duty in life," he continued, "to right any wrong we encounter."

In the piercing cold of my lodgings, we exchanged a fiery handshake.

Shikama headed home at about three in the morning.

I spread my futon out on the floor and extinguished the outer rings of the fluorescent ceiling light, leaving only the faint orange glow of the tiny bulb at its center. The monstrous *maneki-neko* still loomed in the center of the room, dashing any hopes I had for peaceful slumber.

When my mind did at last find sleep, I dreamed of her.

In the dream, I'd just handed her a gift: a high-tech, solar-powered *maneki-neko* with an automatic waving arm. I realized I was reliving that nightmare of a Christmas Eve again. My body hung limp, worn by rage. I felt defeated. To one side stood Shikama, his eyes downcast as he was compelled to slice and serve pieces of Christmas cake. All the while, she stared at me coldly, her face like a rusted steel girder.

I was growing quite anxious about my beloved bicycle, left to suffer the cold winter night in front of Mizuo's apartment building, so I went immediately to retrieve it the next day.

It occurred to me that I risked running into the two of them. They might emerge from the entrance hand in hand, as if in ambush, at the very moment I unlocked the chain and prepared to ride away. Their fingers would be entwined, fresh from an obscene night together in her apartment.

How would I react? What would I do? I asked myself those questions over and over. My mind refused to stop, as if reveling in the self-torture. I felt more alone than ever, a single beacon of decency among the penetrating cold of the Kyoto basin. Manami was all I had left. She was the only one still supporting my battered heart.

I do recognize that my bicycle is not, strictly speaking, female. However, given the gravity of the situation, I hope you find yourself able to overlook that minor detail.

My fists were buried deep in my coat pockets. I walked in silence, scenes of Manami in my mind. How pure! How chaste! She'd stood faithfully at my side through thick and thin.

Come rain or shine, for richer or for poorer, in health and in sickness, my bicycle had always been with me. We'd been through so much together—far more than simple commutes between lodgings and campus. Manami was an integral part of my daily life. Her charming modesty seemed to draw the attention of others, too: If I left her alone for but a moment on the streets of downtown Kyoto, she'd be carried right off to the Jujo Bicycle Impound Lot. Each time it happened, I rushed to get her back. I made the long trek by rail on the Keihan Line, paid the impound fee to the middle-aged man on duty, and walked the rows and rows of dirt-smeared two-wheelers. Manami was inevitably incarcerated in some far-flung corner, left callously exposed to the elements. When I found her, I always knelt beside my precious companion, clasped her tight, and vowed never again to let her from my sight.

It was a poignant scene—and one that had played out between us in the impound lot more times than I could count.

As I'm sure you now see, Manami and I shared a very special bond. Yet she admittedly had a certain intractable wildness about her. Occasionally, she fought the reins of the handlebars, longing to roam free. Once, I was racing down Mikage Street, and she refused to respond to the brakes. I squeezed and squeezed to no avail: Manami would not slow. That morning, we very nearly vanished from this earthly plane along with the early dews of Kitashirakawa Betto.

"Now, now," I chided her gently. "You mustn't be so reckless."

She uttered no response, but I sensed her remorse as she tenderly cooled my rear end with her peeled, weatherworn saddle. The touching exchange left me feeling more attached than ever. I realized I'd never be able to junk her, and for a brief moment, I was seized by a reckless urge to speed off to Iwakura, or Kurama, or even Ohara Sanzen Temple. We'd hide out in the farthest reaches of the city, and I'd never allow anyone else to lay hands upon her, not even to fix her malfunctioning brakes.

I arrived at Mizuo's apartment with my face upturned, pleading to the wintry sky. O Dearest Manami. How could I have been such a coward, to flee from the dark parking lot without you? Can you ever forgive me?

Once I had ascertained that neither Mizuo nor her most unpleasant male companion were loitering in the entryway, I began my search. But my beloved Manami, too, was nowhere to be found. I figured some neighborhood busybody may have carried her to another location and widened my search net, but a thorough scouring of the vicinity failed to yield any trace.

For a short while, I wandered aimlessly and on the verge of tears. Eventually, I had to accept the truth. It was exceedingly unlikely that the city's parking patrols would cover a residential neighborhood like this—and certainly not after one short night. It was only prudent to assume the worst. This was the work of some malevolent third party.

Manami had been bikenapped.

I stood stiff with rage. My numb hands clenched tight as I glared at the cold, ashen sky. My beloved Manami! Where was she? What ruffian of dubious background sat astride her in that very moment? It was only a matter of time before he abandoned her in some run-down corner of town. She would be left scared and alone, wondering when I would come for her, her peeling saddle pelted by freezing rain. O cruel world! Are the gods bereft of mercy? How could my poor bicycle be left to such a fate?

I had no lead with which to continue my search, and I was forced to trudge home the same way I'd arrived.

This was all *his* fault. Just thinking of him made my blood boil. If the man in the parking lot hadn't accosted me, I wouldn't have been forced to flee. Manami wouldn't have been left alone, and I wouldn't be suffering these pangs of parting that yet threatened to tear my chest asunder.

Yes, divine retribution needed to be served. The man would pay for this. I cursed him under my breath and prayed that Shikama's investigation would be swift.

Several days passed. Shikama had promised to make some quiet inquiries among his peers, but I had no means to ascertain his progress or even confirm that he'd begun looking into the matter at all. Common sense would dictate that, by this point in time, he was playing the part of the dashing detective, a thrilling mystery unfolding about him. But again, I had no way of knowing. And since I do not endeavor to write upon matters of which I have no knowledge, I will not speculate further.

The present state of relations between my university and me meant that I was unable to step onto its grounds while the sun remained overhead. I am very fond of the autumn foliage of the North Campus's gingko trees, but I'd been unable to observe it even once this past season.

In spite of my exile, I did not consider myself lonely. Loneliness is a thing born of a perverse desire to interact with the outside world. Consequently, by extinguishing desire, one is not obliged to suffer loneliness. I had no particular need of anything the university had to offer, and it appeared that the university wanted nothing from me. The only contact I'd had were notices regarding my unpaid tuition. Personally, I would have thought that the school might take a more active interest in wooing me back to campus. But I couldn't very well go around looking like I was begging for attention. I'd only make a fool of myself. So I paid an indignant visit to my local branch of the Kyoto Shinkin Bank to initiate the transfer. The university accepted the generous gesture without demur, though I suppose that was also to be expected.

In absence of schooling, my typical day was structured around three primary activities: shifts at a sushi restaurant situated along Higashioji Street; hours spent at my lodgings engaged in reading or deep contemplation; and perusal of the city's many used bookshops. Interspersed were other minor engagements, such as interactions with close acquaintances, continuation of my studies of Mizuo, and trips to the video rental shop. These wove together to form the fabric of my life.

If you were to inquire as to what sort of rarefied experiences punctuated my otherwise uneventful days—great or subtle, but providing some glimpse of the true mysteries of life—I would have to say that there are none. I can only say that, like most youth my age, I am coddled by modern civilization. And yet, once again a product of my generation, I also possess an intolerable callow pride. That is to say, I entertain the obnoxious belief that I am chosen for some higher calling. Alas, like most other young minds, I have no tangible proof to point to. My days are free of the wonders and woes that one might expect in the life of a figure of historical import.

You may then inquire as to the foundation of my hubris. On what do I base my belief that I possess the stuff of greatness? Quite frankly, I'd be grateful if you could tell me. But I'm certain that I do. Somewhere in the damp, dingy, uninviting darkness that is my life, there is a glittering jewel waiting to be unearthed.

And in any case, I much prefer the simple life. In my estimation, the greatest works are carried out quietly, in places far removed from fuss and fanfare. I am regrettably unable to point to any specific endeavor, but I do intend to manage some grand accomplishment within my lifetime. Something that will remain in the annals of world history. Until then, I insist upon excising all stormy vicissitudes from my days to ensure my success. Anything that could disturb my contemplations is most unwelcome. I wish to be left to my own devices. On those occasions that I begin to feel lonely, I only ask that the world briefly focus its attention upon me. That would be quite sufficient for my needs.

Sadly, it is the way of the world to snub you when you wish to be noticed and pester you to no end when you wish to be left alone.

Whenever I was holed up in my lodgings, deep in thought, there was no end to the onslaught of interruptions. The doorbell would ring, and it would invariably be the NHK man trying to collect the month's fees, or missionaries attempting to share the good word of their faith, or a suspicious character hoping for a response to some cryptic survey. I suppose every student occupying a let room is subjected to such nuisances.

For me, the greatest headaches of all were the visits paid by an individual named Yushima. He was two years behind me, putting him in the same

graduating class as Mizuo. And he was also a member of that same certain university sports club. Yushima was a skinny, scrawny sort of man, liable to be carried away by a light breeze. His train of thought was opaque at best. *Ghostlike* might be a fitting overall description. In fact, I would argue he was as close to ghosthood as a living person can be.

Around the time I quit attending the club, I was in arrears. Because I had ceased to attend meetings, along with various other impediments, I unwittingly let quite some time pass without repayment. Eventually, Yushima, who had been appointed treasurer, began to pay me house calls with dogged persistence. My back was against the wall, so as any proper gentleman would, I dutifully scrounged up the cash to settle my debt.

Yet even after the debt was paid, Yushima continued to visit. He was apparently under the impression that I still carried a balance. I, on the other hand, was quite certain I'd paid the full amount. The man seemed to be suffering a misunderstanding. He was fundamentally mistaken. But whenever I told him as much, a smile like spring haze floated to his lips, and he insisted, "Well, see, the numbers just don't add up…"

The issue thus remained unsettled. Eventually, I paid a visit to the club to inquire about Yushima's behavior, only to be told by my underclassmen that Yushima was no longer attending.

From what I gathered, Yushima's ghostlike nature was intensifying. He'd begun actively cultivating it in the early spring of his third year, ensuring that others failed to notice him when he was present and failed to notice his absence when he was not. It had gotten to the point that his friends weren't certain whether he was alive or dead. They were unable to get ahold of him by text or phone and were becoming quite distressed. If Yushima intended to quit the club, there were procedures that had to be followed. His vanishing without a trace presented a headache for everyone involved.

"Next time Yushima stops by to see you," they told me, "try to talk some sense into him, would you?"

And with that, they skillfully dropped their problem into my lap.

From that point on, every time the phantom bill collector appeared at my door, I tried my best to pull him back to reality. However, given that I also tended to navigate life in a rather detached fashion, floating in fantasy some thirty

centimeters above the ground, my ability to be persuasive on this matter was somewhat limited. The more I tried to convince Yushima of the error of his ways, the more concerned I became that I, too, was inhabiting the same ghostly world—and that this was precisely the reason he had latched on to me. The possibility filled me with horror.

Common wisdom holds that misery enjoys a bedfellow, but I must vehemently protest. I refuse to associate myself with Yushima's psychosis.

To elaborate, Yushima appeared to have largely surrendered himself to the clutches of self-loathing. If he simply hated himself outright, that would be one thing. But his brand of flagellation was more reserved, and nothing in this world is more unpleasant to behold than an individual who cannot commit fully to his cause. Yushima's attempts to collect on my imagined debt were always punctuated with fervent confessions of how thoroughly he despised himself.

These exchanges had become quite trying, even for someone as level-tempered as myself. If I was in a particularly good mood, I'd open the door and humor him. When I was not feeling so generous, I'd leave him standing in the hallway. After a while, he'd begin to mumble lines from the "Railway Song." I'd hear him on the other side of the door, plaintively crooning:

The To-ji pagoda is on the left.
The train is rolling in to Shichijo Station.
The conductor calls out "Kyoto! Kyoto!"
His voice is bright and dashing.
This is the city of a thousand years
standing proud since Kanmu's reign!

When it inevitably got on my nerves, I'd counter with verses from the old school anthem:

The flowers blaze red on the distant hills
while the banks are filled with budding green!

I couldn't begin to tell you what we were thinking.

I was in my lodgings, my hands clutching the sides of my head in agony over Shikama's silence, when Yushima decided to pay me a visit.

Initially, I elected to ignore him. But he began shouting from the other side of the door, “Please! You have to help me! I think I’m going crazy!” His shouts grew more and more frantic until I no longer felt comfortable feigning oblivion. An excruciating sense of sympathy began to well up in my heart. I opened the door one tiny sliver, ashamed by my weakness. Yushima was standing there, face dreadfully pale.

“Yes? What’s this business about going crazy?”

“I don’t know how to explain it. I’ve started *seeing* things.”

“Like what?”

“I can’t sleep, so I was lying awake in the middle of the night when I heard a clacking and a rumbling somewhere behind my building. So I went to take a look, and it was a train! The Eizan was rolling right past my apartment!”

“Remind me where your apartment is.”

“Ichijoji. But I’m not anywhere near the tracks!”

“Hmm. Then yes, I agree that’s very peculiar.”

“Trains can’t leave their tracks, can they? I mean, the Eizan shouldn’t be rolling down any old street, right?”

“Of course it shouldn’t. That would be absurd.”

He stared into my eyes intently. “Then I must be going crazy.”

“You’re really worked up about this, aren’t you?” I said. “If you ask me, you’re just overthinking it. All you need to do is clear your mind. When your head is completely empty, you’ll be free of this nonsense.”

“But how can I go about my day if I’m not allowed to think?”

“Aren’t you usually holed up in your room like a shut-in anyway?”

“I’m not a shut-in!”

“But you’ve stopped showing up to club practices, haven’t you? They’re worried about you.”

“I know, but… I just can’t work up the will to go.”

“Well, how about exercising on your own, then?”

“Exercise how? I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

“Don’t think about it. Just go. Head over to the base of Mount Daimonji and climb to the top. In fact, while you’re at it, keep hiking down the other side until you hit Lake Biwa. Don’t stop walking. As long as you stay in motion, you won’t have to think.”

“Why would I want to do that? I’d just tire myself out. I’m a busy person, you know. I’ve got things to do!”
“Mark my words. If you stay holed up in your apartment all day, you *will* go crazy.”
Yushima fell silent.
I pressed once more. “Get out of your room. Head to Daimonji. That’s the best thing you can do for yourself.”
And for once, Yushima left quietly, without any fuss.
For a time, I sat steeped in unpleasant thought. I had considered recommending he seek the services of the university’s counseling center, but I knew Yushima wasn’t likely to go. If he’d possessed the willpower to step on campus, I wouldn’t have been dealing with this mess in the first place. Perhaps a trip up Mount Daimonji wasn’t such a bad suggestion. Maybe it really would cure him of his ails.
To be honest, I couldn’t fathom why Yushima had come to me for advice. When we were both still active club members, we’d hardly ever spoken.
I realized I needed to get out for some fresh air myself, to shake the gloominess lingering in Yushima’s wake. I decided to head to the video shop.

Few twentysomethings are capable of the life of asceticism my compatriots and I pursue. Society urges the individual to drown himself in pleasure. In fact, the pursuit of pleasure is seen as vital to maintaining a healthy economy. People must spend to keep the wheels turning. It’s no great surprise, then, that the abstemious life I choose is looked down upon by others. My economic contribution is roughly equivalent to that of a hibernating bear.
I do not, however, allow society’s jaded perceptions to sway my resolve. I take its criticisms in stride, determined never to surrender my pride.
An ascetic life. When one hears the phrase, undoubtedly the first thing that floats to mind are the monks of old. But even the monks had their tricks to help them persist in self-sacrifice. They knew that such tricks had to be applied assiduously. Letting up for even a moment would allow the allure of the mundane to come into focus. The vices of the world would begin to glitter and gleam, soon too dazzling to make out anything else. And who can hope to

achieve enlightenment or teach others to do the same when blinded by worldly desire?

I imagine some monks became fixated upon the tricks themselves, so much that they forgot their original pursuit. My compatriots and I were keen not to fall into the same rut. We would keep our rationalities intact. We would always be in control of the man downstairs, never he us.

It was an endless struggle. Our mischievous second heads were always anxious to cast off the yoke of reason, and the slightest opportunity could excite their fancies and cause them to thrash wildly. To preserve the tranquility of our minds, we required novel material on a near-daily basis. The video shop therefore played a key role in maintaining our beautiful, inspiring lives of self-sacrifice.

Like most others, I was once burdened by the quintessential guilt of adolescence that accompanies regulatory stimulation. I'm sure that, as a teenager, I must have weakly protested each night, huddled over my soaked pillow, staring at the cyclops with his brazen grin and asking when his seemingly limitless appetite might finally be sated. But by autumn of my first year of college, I was graced by a sudden inspiration. I realized one must abandon all feelings of self-loathing if one wishes to face the world with composure and stand as a pinnacle to rational thought. That conviction took root, and now I have no qualms about the activity whatsoever. If anything, I embrace its utility. I know that I mustn't ever let up, for in this topsy-turvy world, there's no telling when the little head's desires might supplant reason. If he had his way, I'd find myself prancing down the streets of Kiyamachi in the middle of the night, crying "Ha-ha!" and "Wahoo!" as I thrust love letters into the hands of every woman who passed me by. The thought of being reduced to such indiscriminate behavior sends chills down my spine.

That is why it is my firm belief that, to preserve peace on this good earth, every man must take responsibility to quell his savage soul. It is a heavy burden, but it is our duty as members of society.

Determined to do my part, I weave in and out among the staggering mountains of media produced to hoodwink that sinister spearhead of reproductive instinct and allow my ears to heed the shrill cackles of Y chromosomes echoing at every corner. And all the while, I diligently peruse the newest releases. For you see, I

have an intimate knowledge regarding the importance of these preventative measures. Once upon a time, my little man ran amok. It happened when Mizuo and I were together, when my rational mind had checked out. The snake saw his chance and seized it, letting forth a torrent of selfish demands. I was a defeated father lorded over by his rebellious child, unable to manage anything beyond empty scoldings. Johnny had overwhelmed me with his wild ways.

Losing one's rationality is a terrifying thing. Nonetheless, I'm afraid that expounding upon my disoriented state of mind at the time would serve little value to my dear readers or to me. I would be a fool to expose my insipid failures as if making a great and weighty confession. No. On this point I stand firm: I haven't the slightest intention to divulge the details of Mizuo's and my *vita sexualis*.

That noted, let us return to the story.

That day, my mind was once again consumed with the idea of a trip to the video shop. I was eager to see what nubile new flowers graced the shelves.

As you may remember, my dear Manami had been swept off to some unknown place. The trip to the video shop was consequently a laborious one. However, I am not the type to begrudge my gentlemanly duties to society over every slight inconvenience. If anything, I believe that a responsible individual should, when confronted by adversity, be ready to hold himself to an even higher standard in order to keep a tight grip on his rampaging inner beast.

Still, I remained alert as I made my way to the shop. I had to take care that my visit not be observed by acquaintances. Though these were the actions that laid the foundation for social harmony, they were still something to which a gentleman did not openly allude.

When I was safely inside and had begun perusing the endless rows of tapes, I experienced a most curious sensation. I felt as if I was being watched. Frankly, I would assume there is no sight more repellant in this world than that of a man selecting a video to tame his urges. If I were to go through life without ever having to stumble across such a spectacle, I would consider myself very fortunate.

It seemed logical that others would concur. Surely if another patron saw me, he would hastily avert his eyes. Yet the sensation persisted. I flicked my gaze up

and down the aisle in search of the perpetrator but found no one. The cause of my discomfort remained a mystery.
I was alone in the endless labyrinth of pink.

The cold of Kyoto that particular year was hard to put into words. When others write of being chilled to the bone, I suppose this is what they refer to. The dark day of Christmas was two weeks out, and already I was under General Winter's constant siege. Any lapse in my defense had his wintry troops storming through the gaps around my meager door. In rushed Sergeant Winter with his icy bayonet. In rushed Private Winter, Second Class, to stab me again and again. I kept my electric heater on full blast in an attempt to drive them back. It made the needle on the meter outside spin in a half-crazed frenzy, but I'd long ago made peace with that sacrifice.
Even the briefest trip outside caused my temples to twitch. It was as if my epidermis was shrinking in the cold, and there was no longer enough to encompass my skull. I began to fear that the slightest pinprick could cause the skin to pop right off my face. The notion left me very upset, and I related my feelings in minute detail to Shikama via text.
The TV news reporter claimed that the present temperatures weren't typically observed in the city until early February. If we continued along this trajectory uninterrupted, we'd end up colder than an Antarctic researcher stripping down to hop into the bath at Showa Station. We'd enter a new ice age. The entirety of modern civilization would be sealed away in a glacier, and the few of us left alive would be roasting rice cakes on sticks inside an igloo as we waited for the earth to return to an era of warmth.
Each time I stood on a frozen winter roadside, a certain face came to mind. He was a friend from the sports club who demonstrated an unusual tolerance for cold. It could be the dead of winter, the bleak northern winds whipping through the city, and I'd find him dressed in, at most, a light autumn jacket. Sometimes he showed up in a T-shirt. The mere sight made the rest of us shiver under our bulky layers. Eventually, rumors began to circulate about this friend. We theorized that through some freak mutation, his blood cells had come to produce a steady stream of ethylene glycol. Even in summer, his apartment building in Tanaka Okubo remained cool enough to leave visitors shivering.

Stays exceeding an hour risked death by exposure. Roses froze solid. Bananas could be used to hammer nails. It was even said General Winter staged his yearly campaigns in those very rooms.

A while back, I'd heard he found a job and moved away to Tokyo. I pitied him. He probably spent his mornings and evenings swaying among the packed bodies of a rush-hour train, scuttling between office and employee dormitory. I imagined that, for him, the sweltering heat of a crowded commute must be utterly unbearable.

If only he'd been fortunate enough to be born during a true ice age. He'd have been a legendary hero. He'd have walked the glaciers with nothing but a pelt about his waist. But as luck would have it, the world is full of individuals born into the wrong era.

I, too, consider myself an anachronism. I was surely meant to be born into a time and place in which my talents could be properly recognized—an era where others were always mistaken, and I was always right. If my birth had been timed correctly, I would have known no adversity. I would have been able to grasp the intentions of others before they even opened their mouths. I'd revel in debauchery. The balances of my bank account would double between every idle glance. I'd race up the ladder to world domination, loosing the Gordian knot with one fell swoop and accomplishing what even Alexander the Great could not. If only…

These were the thoughts that occupied my mind as I marked off the days of the cold Kyoto winter.

A message arrived from Shikama:

I reunited with a certain old friend. We've known each other since elementary school, but we hadn't seen each other in eleven years. He's now a student at Hirosaki University.

We met for lunch, over which he shared the news that he's been offered a position as an assistant professor at Kyoto University. He also brought along his darling sweetheart to introduce. They're to be married this spring.

Awful, isn't it?

Thank goodness I awoke in my bed a moment later and realized none of it was true.

It seems the incident with the dreamball has struck a deeper wound in my tender heart than I cared to admit. My soul still has a long road to perfection.

If Shikama wished to wallow in shame over the inadequacies of his mind, that was his prerogative. But it was sheer torture for me to read about now.
I desperately wanted to scream at him, “What about the investigation?!”

As you may remember, I’d abandoned my duties at the research lab in the Faculty of Agriculture. Several times a week, I now spent a portion of my day in employ as a delivery person for a local sushi restaurant.
I do not engage in this pursuit under some delusion that certain lessons must be learned outside the ivory tower. Manual labor offers nothing of import to individuals of my caliber. That is to say: I didn’t take this job because I imagined it would elevate me as a human being. I did it to sock away cash.
Still, it would be a lie to say I harbored no gratitude toward the owner and his wife. Having read this far, I’m sure you understand that I’m a very particular individual. In fact, I’m often *too* particular, to the point that I impede my own progress.
To put it another way, I would not describe myself as quick to adapt to new situations. It’s not a quality I’m ashamed of. If anything, I see it as a strong point. But on occasion, the things we see in ourselves as virtues are regarded by the rest of the world as faults.
Nonetheless, the owner and his wife, who had together operated the restaurant ever since its establishment over a decade ago, immediately accepted my purported fault with an unprecedented degree of patience. You could walk to the ends of Japan and back and not find another employer so considerate. You might even say I looked up to them. The owner’s generosity towered among the highest peaks, and his wife’s ran deeper than the sea. Well, on second thought, that might be going a bit too far.
My duties were manifold, from washing dishes to mixing the vinegar into the rice. But the lion’s share of my shift was spent making deliveries. I straddled a decidedly unfashionable scooter and flitted around the city. Consequently, my knowledge of Kyoto’s winding alleys and crowded neighborhoods had grown ever richer. I was now quite confident that I could burrow my way to anywhere in the city.

Predictably, many of our orders were placed by faculty and students at my university. These deliveries made for a curious experience, as they had me passing through the campus gates more often as a sushi deliveryman than I presently did as a student.

I once took an order to a research lab in the Graduate School of Science where an upperclassman from my club days now studied. His name was Kumada. On seeing me, he had only one thing to say: “Quit messing around and finish your degree.”

I uttered no argument, though I felt Kumada was hardly one to judge. As an undergraduate, he’d been a bit of a legend for having managed to pass only four credits’ worth of classes in his entire second year. The source of his distraction remained shrouded in mystery, but even more intriguing was the unanswered question of precisely *which* four credits he had barely managed to earn. The mere fact that Kumada had eventually wormed his way into grad school didn’t seem like any reasonable basis for him to trot out on his high horse now.

Another frequent source of orders was from the Faculty of Medicine. The girls there were as beautiful as they were intelligent, clad in their white lab coats as they assiduously applied themselves to their studies. I enjoyed those trips in a masochistic sort of way, as a pitiable student relegated to self-imposed exile.

In short, my simple delivery job was full of experiences that were anything but.

We’d received a rather cryptic order placed via cell phone. The customer was a woman apparently living in the Tanaka Higashi Haruna neighborhood. The drop-off point, she explained, was rather hard to find. I was to locate a small alleyway to the side of a dilapidated building and proceed all the way to the back.

I jotted down the order, hung up, and muttered to myself, “What on earth…?”

When I relayed the details to the owner, he briefly tilted his head to one side but proceeded to nimbly and diligently shape the small mounds of rice with his hands. Once the order was ready, I placed it on the scooter and zipped off in the direction of the neighborhood in question.

My thoughts were running wild about my mysterious destination. The far corner of a derelict building. It was like a ghost story. I was half certain I’d

enter and find the room chock-full of haphazardly piled cardboard boxes and unidentifiable heaps of junk. Everything would be laden with a thick coat of dust. Somewhere near the back, I'd find an old-fashioned black telephone sitting on the bare floor, the handset and base polished to a lustrous sheen. A weak light would filter in through tattered, rotting curtains.

Next to the telephone, I'd spot a glass fishbowl containing the precise amount of cash needed to cover the order, sales tax included. I'd call out, "Hello? Sushi delivery!" But there would be no answer. And then, when I stooped down to scoop out the money, a pile of cardboard would come crashing down, and a pale, glowing skeleton would leap from the rubble and curl its arms about me. The last thing I'd see was the sushi spilled across the floor, crushed.

A new urban legend was about to be born: the tale of the sushi deliveryman who took an order to an abandoned building and never returned.

When I arrived at the designated building, the exterior was frighteningly similar to what I'd imagined. I would have never expected such an ominous structure could exist so close to home.

Boards were nailed across the front entrance, and the weeds at either side were tall and scraggly. I looked up to find the windows blocked out with thin sheets of cardboard. Several panes were cracked or missing. Honestly, the whole place was so eerie that if I'd spotted a grinning specter at one of those dark windows, I might have casually waved hello.

To the side of the condemned structure sat an old, two-story apartment building. And sure enough, a tiny alleyway ran between the two, just wide enough for a single determined individual to squeeze through. I headed toward the back as instructed, stepping over rain-swollen piles of old magazines and mud-caked bits of machinery that sought to hinder my way.

The dim alleyway emerged into a wide, sunny space that appeared to have once served as the courtyard for the condemned building. Run-down structures surrounded it on three sides, leaving only the eastern approach open.

The courtyard itself was lined with concrete slabs, among which sprouted stray clumps of weeds. In the center, I spotted a lone man, gripping his head and squatting weakly on the ground. A woman was leaning out from a second-story railing straight above, gesticulating wildly and hurling a barrage of satsuma mandarins at the pitiful, cowering man. One fruit pelted him square in the

crown, arced back through the air, and tumbled along the ground, coming to rest near my feet. I stood dumbfounded, clutching the order of sushi to my chest.

A small group of young men and women milled about one corner of the courtyard not far from the alleyway exit. One was observing the torrent of satsumas through the lens of a large, antique-looking movie camera.

A woman in the group noticed me, grinned, and dashed in my direction.

“Thank you so much for coming all the way out here,” she said.

“Are you…shooting a film?” I ventured.

“Yeah. More or less.”

She gave an embarrassed smile and turned back toward the others.

“Sushi’s here!” she announced.

A man who had until then been staring fixedly at the actors, arms crossed proudly, turned to face me. My eyes locked on his pathetic excuse for a goatee. There was no way I could forget that ratty patch of whiskers. It was him. It was the man who had insulted me in front of Mizuo’s apartment and threatened to call the police.

He clearly recognized me as well, and we exchanged brief, derisive stares before resuming the facade of strangers.

“Great. Pay him,” he instructed the woman, placing several thousand-yen bills into her palm.

He strode off, uncurling a sheaf of paper that seemed to serve as their script. While busily penciling notes in the margins. his brows knit in consternation, as if to say, *I’ve no time to fuss about with sushi. I’m creating art.*

The woman who paid and accepted the delivery remained as bright and friendly as before. But from the moment I saw her accept the bills from the goateed-man’s hand, I pitied her. I could tell she revered him with all her heart.

Nothing good will come of worshipping that buffoon, I wanted to tell her. If anything, you’d be better off idolizing me.

But I held my tongue, deciding it wouldn’t do to forget my humility.

“Thank you for your business,” I chirped, my voice intentionally shrill. “We can’t wait to serve you again!”

And with that, I left the condemned building behind.

I rode back to the shop on the scooter, pondering this unfinished movie the man was obviously very proud of. It was probably one of those needlessly abstruse films, studded with cheap, disjointed dream sequences, its story incoherent. On the surface, it would appear deep, but a moment's contemplation would reveal it to be as shallow as the Takase River along the Kiyamachi red-light district. I was sure of it. It was the kind of film that would have audiences shaking their heads at the director, saying, *Who does this dolt think he is? The next Seijun Suzuki or Shuji Terayama?*

Just to be clear, I don't mean to insult Suzuki and Terayama. I wouldn't want to give my dear readers the wrong impression. I'm making fun of the young minds that aspire to be like those legends of cinema and fail miserably, yet go on trying anyway. It's embarrassing to watch.

When I returned, the sushi restaurant owner asked me, "So how was the place?"

I simply shook my head, one corner of my mouth curled wryly.

Balzac's enormous body of work is said to have been fueled by a vast quantity of coffee. Some describe it as a *river* of coffee. That's how much of the stuff the man drank. I don't remember where I read it, but he supposedly consumed fifty thousand cups over his lifetime. He carried his own personal coffeepot with him so he could be certain the raging current never slowed. His exquisite personal blend was comprised of Bourbon, Mocha, and Martinique. I'm not certain of the ratios of each type of bean. I think, however, I might like to look into it someday. Perhaps if I gulp down cup after cup of Balzac's signature blend, I, too, will produce an unending torrent of literary masterpieces—and then gulp vainly for air as I drown in a mire of debt.

Personally, I prepare and drink perhaps four or five cups of coffee per day. I don't pretend to be so versed in the subject as to start developing my own original blend. But neither am I the type to feel satisfied with the ready-made stuff for sale at the convenience store. Instead, I frequented a small roaster that I happened to discover one day near Ginkaku Temple. It was one of my small pleasures in life to stop by, place an order for freshly ground beans, and then purchase a *Daimonji-yaki* pastry to snack on as I make my way home.

The shop was a tiny place. No more than a hole in the wall, really, measuring perhaps two mats in size. The shop counter faced the street and was staffed by a rather gaunt-looking girl, who was indisputably beautiful but had a slight trembling about her, as if indicative of a precarious mental state.

The girl disliked social interaction. Only when she was turning the handle of the grinder, listening to the crunch of the beans being reduced to fine powder, did she ever seem at peace. It was a compulsion, in fact. A few months prior, she'd decided that beans no longer sufficed, and her eyes began seeking larger prey. Each night, she'd sneak back into the shop to feed small, fluffy animals into her mill, grinding them to a pulp as they shrieked and squealed, a devilish grin on her face all the while.

That was the story I liked to tell myself, anyhow, as I waited at the counter. My mind sped off in its mad dash of fantasy, and my body would start to tremble. And as I trembled, the girl would finish grinding my coffee. She'd hand me the little bag of freshly ground beans and offer a complementary caramel candy. I accepted the thoughtful gesture with a smile, wondering if the caramel was her way of luring me in—and that one day soon I'd find myself a victim of her grisly grinder.

In all, I'd spent over a year enjoying my daydreams about the girl at the coffee roaster and our bloody, one-sided trysts.

That evening, after my unexpected reunion with the man from Mizuo's parking lot, I was in a particularly sour mood. I needed something to soothe my mind and decided to take a trip to my roaster. I hadn't been by in some two weeks.

I arrived at the shop front to find everything gone, replaced by a new tenant.

I am no stranger to the vicissitudes of time. I know that things come and go in this fleeting world. But this particular disappearance struck at my heart. Were the stormy seas of reality truly so fierce? Did they have to sweep in and carry away that poor, fragile girl's meager shop? She'd done nothing wrong. Her compulsions had simply led her a bit astray. It was only a few small mammals.

And worse, where was I now to procure my coffee? I could spend my whole life searching and never find another shop run by a girl who trembled and teetered on the edge, whose only respite in life was the systematic pulverization of solid objects into fine dust. Why was I being punished? I did my best to lead a hermitic, ecologically friendly life, only to have my one meager worldly

enjoyment seized away. Surely the god enshrined at Kitashirakawa Tenjin was in error. Why was *my* name upon his divine checklist of those who deserved punishment? He must have me mixed up with someone else!

I peered through the windows at the new tenant's wares. The shelves were lined with imported foodstuffs. I fumed. The era of import worship is over!

But when I caught a glimpse of the shopkeeper, my fury turned to astonishment. There, surrounded by all the cans and jars, was Ebizuka.

I spun on my heel and pumped my legs as fast as I could. The storm that had raged between this particular upperclassman and myself was still crystal clear in my mind.

Dear gods!

Ebizuka yet lived!

Ebizuka was one year my senior and had belonged to that same certain university sports club.

From the day I joined, I felt a rift between us, of width and depth rivaling the Japan Trench itself, and I knew we would never bridge the gap. He was the type whose blood ran pointlessly hot. He felt constantly driven to prove himself a man among men. Whenever I stood within speaking distance of Ebizuka, I felt uncomfortably warm, as if the air around him was perpetually five degrees higher than any other part of the room. It was a given that an intellectual like myself could never find common ground with such a hotheaded brute.

Back then, Shikama was still a member of the club, too, and both he and I found ourselves routinely subjected to Ebizuka's stares of disapproval. We in turn despised him just as passionately.

Ebizuka lived life according to a code. It was an old-fashioned and stuffy one, and its tenets meant everything in the world to him. These were not the dear old virtues of yesteryear, long abandoned by a cold, modern world. Rather, Ebizuka seemed to have assembled a random assortment of indicators with no rhyme or reason, which he used as his own personal metric of masculinity. To Shikama and me, both men of logic, it was the behavior of a deviant.

For example, in Ebizuka's world, a man was not a man unless capable of drinking prodigious quantities of alcohol. Anyone unable to hold his liquor was a lowly pest. At club parties, my compatriots and I were obliged to scuttle

about restlessly, lest Ebizuka's attention alight upon us. Ido seemed to have been born under a particularly unlucky star, as he was always most prone to garnering Ebizuka's attentions. It grew so intolerable, Ido took to take refuge in the bathroom for much of the duration of every party, just to avoid Ebizuka's constant proffering of drinks to be chugged.

In good weather, the club organized barbeques on the Kamo River Delta. I'd lost count of the number of times we'd fantasized about pushing Ebizuka into the surrounding waters.

In Ebizuka's eyes, hazing was perfectly acceptable social behavior. He relished the role of the panzer, bulldozing any man of moderation under his ruthless treads. Frankly, his behavior was an affront to alcohol aficionados the world over. Takayabu, while clutching a handle of *shochu* to his breast, had once remarked that it is the height of folly to waste good liquor on someone who doesn't enjoy it.

Similarly, Ebizuka was fond of excessively spicy food. Anyone who couldn't handle copious amounts of cayenne pepper was a lowly pest. He ordered his ramen and curry loaded with as much spice as the shop would provide. Shikama found this particularly abhorrent, calling it an abuse of the worst kind. "Spiciness is the sensation of your tongue's taste receptors dying!" Shikama had exclaimed. "That tingling you feel is a literal chorus of death cries from your body's lovely little cells!"

We prayed for the day that a great, chronic ulcer would form in the pit of Ebizuka's stomach and finally put an end to this madness.

If he'd simply enjoyed spicy food, we wouldn't have had any qualms. It was the fact that he *forced* himself to eat such foods for the sake of his ridiculous code. "Real men need fire in their bellies!" he'd declare, and then proceed to shovel down mouthful after mouthful though clearly on the verge of tears. It was detestable. It was an affront to spicy food aficionados the world over.

And then there was Ebizuka's take on tobacco. He smoked so heavily, I half expected his lungs to dissolve to mush. Anyone who smoked with filters was, to him, a lowly pest. Real men needed full, undiluted hits of tobacco. Thus Ebizuka made a point of only smoking unfiltered brands so everyone around would know just how rugged he was.

I am quite fond of smoking myself, but I couldn't wrap my head around the concept of maximizing daily consumption just for appearances. The whole point of a predilection is to enjoy oneself. A man should settle into the rate of consumption that personally appeals to him. Ebizuka's approach was sacrilege to the whole culture of smoking.

There were numerous other facets to Ebizuka's code. He lived chained to them, such that I could only conclude that he passed his days in a constant state of misery and indignation.

He idolized Ryoma Sakamoto and endlessly repeated this particular saying attributed to that samurai of yore: "The purpose of coming into the world is to accomplish one's duty." Ebizuka adored these words despite the fact that he'd clearly failed to accomplish anything with his own life. Sakamoto might have been a very respectable individual, but the act of worshipping a man doesn't inherently confer equal stature.

At parties, Ebizuka liked to pull out a large decorative sword and swing it around in circles. He dubbed this activity his Festival of Ryoma. Every time my compatriots and I saw it, we felt a great surge of pity and contempt. About halfway through our second year, we admittedly began to derive a perverse sort of pleasure from the show. But that certainly never translated to affection or respect for the man.

My tense relationship with Ebizuka continued in that manner, without any particular surprises, until the early summer of my third year, when Mizuo happened to become a part of our club. The twisted tale of discord that subsequently unfolded between us is a memory I have no desire to dredge back up.

Thus spake Shikama:

"Imagine the verdant fields of a ranch. A lush carpet of green stretches in all directions, as far as the eye can see. In one round, fenced-off plot of this ranch lives a flock of sheep. Most of the sheep munch on the grass and laze about peacefully, not a thought in their minds. They are content with the lives they lead.

“On the other hand, some of the sheep are plagued by a persistent yet vague concern. *I look like a sheep*, they think to themselves, *but is that truly what I am? And if not a sheep, what am I?*

“Others take a few timid steps beyond the gate and swiftly return, boasting of their grand adventures in the outside world to anyone who will listen. Still others sit in audience to these stories with rapt attention.

“Then there are those who step outside the gate and wander away, never to return.

“Among all these different sheep is one lone specimen who stands a fair distance off from the others. He knows full well that he is a sheep and has no desire to venture beyond the gate—honestly, he finds the prospect rather terrifying. At the same time, he is not happy with his life within the fenced-off plot.

“To a casual observer, this sheep doesn’t appear much different from the others. But when you watch him closely, you find that he’s constantly engaged, silently and with great concentration, in producing the most elaborate and exquisite piles of excrement you’ve ever seen. Yes, they’re just clumps of sheep dung. But they’re incredibly ornate. Ultimately, however, that doesn’t change the fact that they’re made of shit.

“That sheep is me.”

Shikama had a weakness for two types of women: those with bold, confident demeanors and those with sickly constitutions.

Of course, when I say Shikama had a weakness for such women, I do not mean to suggest he pursued them. He was, after all, our famously austere leader. Shikama was perfectly content with looking. All he wished to do was stare at the women of his affections quietly and from a distance. He carried a mental map with him that highlighted the locations of all women he deemed currently worthy of his notice. This included individuals like Miss Arita, who ran the register at the university’s Central Cafeteria; Miss Mitamura, who worked at the local Kentucky Fried Chicken; and Dr. Nikawa, who was in the employ of the Baptist Eye Institute. These activities of Shikama’s provided vital respite from his days steeped in the study of legal precedents and principles.

He’d also become quite infatuated with a particular student in the Faculty of Law who worked evenings at the convenience store near his lodgings. It seemed that over time she’d grown aware of the heated stares he cast when “conveniently” dropping by the store or passing her at school. Shikama explained that she now grew visibly suspicious whenever she caught sight of him, to the point that he feared rather than relished in any legitimately fortuitous encounter around the city. If anything, this detail proved anew what a perfect leader Shikama was for us. I saw the way he spent his time consumed by one fruitless struggle after another, always jammed between a rock and an insoluble dilemma, and I knew there was no one more suited to show us the way.

At long last, Shikama had information to relay. Our meeting was to take place at the KFC in Kitashirakawa, the workplace of his beloved Miss Mitamura.

When I walked into the shop, the girl in question smiled at me from behind the register. Her face struck me as slightly more gaunt than usual. I noted that the shop was already accepting reservations for meals of Christmas chicken.

Shikama had a thick legal text spread out on the table and was wearing a surly scowl. An endless stream of holiday tunes floated through the shop, with lyrics about keeping warm by the fire, bonding as a family, snuggling close with your special someone on Christmas Eve, and ensuring gastronomical yuletide happiness by placing a reservation today. The deceitful strains curled about our ears and probed at our psyches.

“This may very well constitute torture,” Shikama muttered as I sat down.

I’d have thought it prudent to change venues, but Shikama was obstinate. He would not capitulate to Christmas fascism. His battle against the cultural onslaught continued around the clock. Every year, he pushed himself to the point of breaking, and come Christmas morn, he’d develop a fever and be forced to spend all day in bed.

I worried for his health.

I glanced at the counter, where Miss Mitamura was milling about behind the register.

“Has she lost more weight?” I asked.

“The poor girl can’t catch a break.”

“Seems like it’s getting worse by the day.”

“The real villain is that damn stepfather of hers. I wish her mother would do something about him.”
“Well, that scoundrel of a boyfriend isn’t helping matters.”
“Poor thing.”
“Such a tragedy.”
We continued on like that, lamenting Miss Mitamura’s life circumstances. We cursed her sadistic boyfriend, who used to play American football, and fumed about her deadbeat stepfather.
Miss Mitamura worked herself to the bone to help her family make ends meet. About half a year back, she’d been forced to quit school to take on more hours, as her stepfather was constantly drunk and preferred chasing get-rich-quick schemes to holding down a stable job. The girl, bless her soul, refused to abandon her family and did everything she could to help her mother keep the household afloat. This in spite of the fact that the stepfather was also abusive; he’d get violent, even making moves on his own stepdaughter.
To top it all off, she just couldn’t seem to break things off with her hypermasculine boyfriend. The man entertained urges of a most deviant nature, such that any time spent together offered no respite for poor Miss Mitamura. He couldn’t keep his paws off her.
In truth, Shikama and I had history with the man. His current twisted nature was almost certainly rooted in a thoroughly emasculating defeat he’d once suffered at Shikama’s hands.
In any case, Miss Mitamura bravely soldiered on through her bleak situation. It was the heart-wrenching tale of a determined heroine beset by every possible difficulty. The story of her life could have been easily mistaken as a lost chapter of Shugoro Yamamoto’s *Lives of Great Japanese Women*. And every moment we spent imagining the details of that life tightened the vice on our chests. We prayed she would find happiness and live out her days in peace.
Alas, no matter how fervently we poured our minds and souls into those prayers, I knew that Miss Mitamura would reject them. For one thing, she was far too proud to accept others’ pity. And critically, the stepfather and boyfriend didn’t exist. They were figments of Shikama’s and my imagination.
Fantasies like this defined us. Shikama and I were battered and beaten, our minds subjected to countless days of voluntary, self-generated abuse. Together,

we lamented the abominable state of the modern world, rotten to its very core. Though, in truth, I at times had to admit some confusion as to whether it was the world that had rotted or ourselves. Either way, the great majority of our days were consumed by these vast, demanding fantasies.
As Shikama once put it, “You and I spend ninety percent of our day to day inside the mind.”

Shikama set a piece of paper on the table at KFC. It was a printout of the photo from before.
According to Shikama’s sources, the man’s name was Tadashi Endou. As I’d predicted, Endou’s acquaintance with Mizuo came through school: He was also in his third year, and the two of them were enrolled in the same research seminar in the Faculty of Law. Endou was regarded neither as a particularly outstanding student nor a particularly poor one. He’d had a girlfriend at one time, but they had since split up. The film he was shooting was his own original creation.
When I asked Shikama how he’d managed to procure such detailed information, Shikama explained that he’d approached Endou personally after class one day. I was thoroughly impressed. Here was a man who kept his promises and took no shortcuts to see his commitments upheld. It was in his nature. Years ago, when deciding what type of cigarettes to smoke, he’d purchased one pack of every major brand, taken them all home, and proceeded to dissect them in order to analyze the structural differences in design of each brand’s filter.
In the process of investigating Endou, Shikama had taken it upon himself to follow the man on several occasions, hoping to measure the frequency of his interactions with Mizuo. On a typical afternoon, Endou spent a while browsing the campus bookstore and other co-op facilities after class, then returned to his lodgings, which were situated near the Yoshida Shrine. Sometimes, he engaged in recreational activities with his filmmaking associates.
But just as Shikama was about to conclude that Endou lived a very dull and predictable life, he witnessed a most striking deviation.

One day, rather than heading home, Endou set out northward by bicycle on Shirakawa Street. This was a first, and Shikama was giddy with excitement about where it might lead.

He followed Endou up through the residential streets of Kamiikeda and on to Yamanaka Pass. It was here that a building quite familiar to Shikama made its ill-omened appearance—my very own little fortress. Endou pulled the brim of his hat down low and began riding back and forth over a small stretch of road a few meters away from the entrance to my lodgings.

Shikama retreated to the shadows of a nearby temple gate and continued his observation. After some time, yours truly casually sauntered out of the apartment. I then began to make my way downhill toward the Betto intersection.

Endou circled around to follow me. Shikama followed, too, such that Shikama was now tailing Endou, who was tailing me.

“We followed you into the video shop in Takano,” Shikama explained. “While you were carefully pouring over the newest releases, Endou was staring at you from the other side of the racks, and I was one rack farther back, staring at him.”

“Wh-wh…? What?”

So that was the source of the intense staring I’d felt from within the pink labyrinth. The perpetrators were Endou and Shikama.

“As to the issue of which particular videos you selected in order to quell your inner beast that evening… Well, I’ll leave that point unaddressed. As a gentleman, it is my duty to pretend I did not see. Though actually, I did see.”

“Please endeavor to stay a gentleman.”

“Your rental complete, we saw you walk into the donut shop at the Takano intersection,” Shikama continued. “I must say, though, you really don’t fit the demographic. That donut shop is trying very hard to cultivate a bright, trendy atmosphere of youth, and your patronage isn’t doing it any favors.”

“Can we get on with the report, please.”

“After that, you headed back to your lodgings. Endou followed you as far as the intersection at Kitashirakawa and then headed home himself. And that’s it.”

Shikama sat grinning from ear to ear. I lit up a cigarette and sipped on my coffee. It was evening, so there weren’t many other customers seated inside. In

fact, there was only one: another male student with textbooks spread out across his table like Shikama, listening to music as he focused intently on his studies.

I contemplated the things I'd just heard. I hadn't exactly been wronged, but I felt very displeased about the whole ordeal.

"What's his angle?" I asked.

"Beats me," replied Shikama. "Maybe he's got a crush on you. Anyway, now that you know how it feels to be on the other end, maybe you'll be less inclined to stalking."

You're one to talk, I thought.

Shikama glanced out the window at Shirakawa Street. I followed his eyes and saw that snow had begun to fall. Several college girls were walking down the sidewalk, looking up at the sky and chattering excitedly. I felt miserably certain we'd be seeing a white Christmas this year.

Shikama interrupted my thoughts. "There's one thing that still bothers me, though."

"What's that?"

He paused, then said, "No, I'll not say it yet. I don't want to jump to any conclusions."

Dear Sir:

I write to inform you that, as per our conversation the other day, any further attempts to harass the woman in question will not be tolerated. Consider this your final warning. If you persist, we will be forced to seek legal action.

As it is our desire to avoid the need to take such measures if at all possible, we implore you to heed this warning and immediately cease any and all untoward behavior. Be advised that, at the present juncture, she entertains no preferential feelings for you. She had been under the impression that you two arrived at a mutual understanding regarding the severing of your relationship last year, and she therefore feels a great deal of disappointment in your present actions.

As a fellow male, it is not difficult for me to imagine the workings of your mind and the inner turmoil you doubtless endure. But youth is no excuse for misconduct—and certainly not for indecorous behavior toward others. Even as

students, we are obliged to take full responsibility for our actions and to subject ourselves to the rule of law. I strongly request that you refrain from any further foolish behavior and instead seek out other, more productive uses of your time.

(Unsigned)

I am quite fond of letter writing. I used to write letters to a friend from my high school days who now lives in Kyushu. My compositions were lengthy and intricate, often requiring a full evening to read. My friend frequently expressed to me what a great nuisance he found my letters to be.

And for a time, when my rational mind had momentarily surrendered to infatuation, I'd written letters to Mizuo, too. I wrote to her almost daily, producing so many pages of text, it was as if I had become a best-selling novelist overnight. I wrote letters for her birthday, letters for Christmas, and letters for Valentine's Day. I wrote letters to apologize, letters to express my rage, and heart-wrenching letters certain to provoke tears. I wrote to her from my parents' home. I wrote to her from London whilst studying abroad. I wrote and wrote and wrote like an imbecile until I could write no more. Mizuo claimed her home was beginning to look like a shed for collecting old paper on its way to be recycled.

And how foolish it all was. I can't even recall what I wrote or why I'd believed I had so much to say. I suppose I ought to be thankful, for if I did remember the content of my letters, I'm sure the resulting sense of embarrassment would be debilitating enough to deny me any further pleasure from life. I'd jump onto the Eizan and flee to the wilderness of Kibune, where I'd renounce all contact with human civilization.

I had no difficulty, therefore, in replying to Endou's churlish letter. The words flew freely once pen touched paper, and I found myself relishing in the process.

To Whom It May Concern:

I have received and perused your words of caution. I am afraid my own knowledge of legal matters is quite lacking. I certainly do not expect my grasp of the subject to rival that of a student of the Faculty of Law, given your countless hours of arduous study.

However, in light of your accompanying accusations, I am compelled to clarify my position. Know that I entertain no preferential feelings for the woman in question and that I am under quite the same impression regarding the mutual understanding reached in our discussion last year. I harbor no lingering attachment. In fact, I consider myself quite fortunate to be free of the fetters of our relationship. Consequently, I think it plain to see that you have grossly misinterpreted my actions. You have passed unilateral judgment on me based on utter conjecture, and it is most unjust.

Furthermore, know that a close associate of mine has alerted me to your recent encroachments upon my privacy. Namely, I am aware that you have been following me as I go about my personal affairs. Setting aside your misguided interpretation of my behaviors, am I to understand that you are of the belief that another's impropriety grants you free reign to engage in impropriety yourself? Given your aspirations to pursue a career as a practitioner of law, I find myself filled with grave apprehensions regarding the future integrity of our nation's system of justice.

Or perhaps I have misread the situation, and your decision to overstep the bounds of my privacy in such flagrant fashion is rooted in some amatory motive. I will admit that I am a handsome individual, and it does not surprise me that others may at times find themselves irresistibly drawn to me regardless of gender. Nonetheless, if this is in fact the reason for your impropriety, I must unfortunately inform you that, at least insofar as my own romantic capacity is concerned, I do not foresee myself being able to reciprocate your feelings now or at any time hence. No matter how boundless a love may be, there are certain chasms it will never cross.

More importantly, I would draw your attention to the fact that love is nothing more than a temporary state of mental disarray. I would suggest that it is in your best interest to recognize sooner rather than later the foolishness of allowing emotion to govern your actions.

If you believe yourself unable to do this, then as a last recourse and to spare you further heartbreak, I would recommend that you find a different, more suitable target for your affections—that is to say, someone other than myself. I write these things with the deepest sense of regret, and I am, of course, very flattered by your attentions. However, I must strongly request that you refrain

from any further foolish behavior and instead seek out other, more productive uses of your time.

(Unsigned)

It was two PM the day after I mailed the aforementioned letter. I'd awoken from a sleep that stretched on far too long. After a smoke, I decided to venture out to the local bakery to procure breakfast. The bakery, located on an alley about a three minutes' walk from my lodgings, was a cozy, endearing sort of place. For several years now, I'd been unable to begin my day without dropping by for my usual: a small, freshly baked loaf of French bread split and fitted with sausage inside, a cream bun, and a cup of coffee. Even before I left the warmth of my futon, I could feel the exquisite crunch of the crust between my teeth and the fragrant aroma of the shop's interior tickling my nose.

I turned the knob of my door, mind lost in a fantasy of bread. But when I pushed, the door wouldn't budge. Frustrated, I slammed my body against it, which only produced a terrible, sticky creak.

I folded my arms and observed the door. I'd spent the great majority of my extended college career holed up in the walls of my apartment, but that was not because I'd been forced to. I chose to spend my time here of my own free will, having concluded that a primarily indoor lifestyle was conducive to my personal goals. Being stuck in my room normally would have not bothered me in the slightest, but it is like night and day between freely choosing a lack of freedom and having one's freedom taken away against one's free will.

After struggling with the door a while longer, I finally decided to open the window, crawl out to the bicycle parking area at the back of the building, circle around to the front entrance, and approach my own door from the outside. There, I was presented with a most atrocious sight: My entire door had been covered with strip after strip of duct tape, as if I had been declared a toxic hazard and my room sealed off for the public's protection.

A scrap of paper dangled from one tiny speck of un-taped door. On it were listed the titles of the videos I'd checked out from the video shop the other day —titles I'd rather avoid repeating here, out of concern for how they might affect my standing in my dear readers' minds.

Below the list was a brief message:

Consider living your life with a bit more integrity.

I crumpled the note into a ball and set about the task of unsealing my door.

Anger burned in my breast. What a thing to say! And especially to someone like me, a gentleman of integrity heretofore unknown! This type of roguery was precisely why I detested interactions with illogical men.

Still, as I ripped another strip of tape from the doorframe, I muttered to myself, "This Endou is a rather usual fellow, isn't he?"

At this point in the story, I must introduce to my readers the phenomenon known as the cockroach cube.

Perhaps there are some of you who are already well acquainted with this. It is the kind of thing you find in the space under your sink or perhaps inside a long-neglected cardboard box. At first glance, it's easy to mistake for a jiggling block of black tofu. Its olive-brown surface possesses an oily sheen, and it seems to wriggle and writhe with excitement. Only on closer inspection is the cube's true nature revealed: It is a mass of constant crawling motion, composed of countless roaches heaped atop one another.

Prior to life as a single adult, I'd been unaware of roaches' proclivity to assemble themselves in such a manner. Perhaps the cockroach cube is a phenomenon peculiar to Kyoto roaches. At any rate, over my extended experience as a college student, I've now encountered such cubes many a time. The first time I saw one and understood its composition, I found my courage all but sucked away. I was aghast. And then, after a while, when I really took the time to observe the cube, I found that its wriggling radiance possessed an almost narcotic effect. This ostensibly simple object seemed to offer a glimpse into the deepest mysteries of life.

Later, I learned that a particular research lab in the Faculty of Science keeps cockroach cubes on hand for entomological study. I don't remember where I heard it, but I'm certain that I did.

It just so happened that on the very evening of my bitter experience with the sealed door, in the deepest recesses of a dimly lit shelf, I spied a familiar twinkling. Just a glimpse of its hypnotic light was enough to convince me of the requisite course of action. Simply put, I'd found the perfect Christmas present for my dearest Mr. Endou.

Who wouldn’t rejoice on receipt of such a gift? I was delivering to him the very secrets of life. When he witnessed the cube’s splendor, all notions of romantic attachment and other foolishness would at once flee his mind. He would wander aimlessly no more.

The challenge of stuffing an intact cockroach cube into a garbage bag is something that can only be comprehended by a person who has attempted the feat. Perhaps, dear readers, it is something you would be content never to understand. At any rate, I can assure you it is no easy task. The moment you draw near, the eager creatures begin to disperse, impeding your efforts. In my case, I was forced to annihilate several that separated themselves from their oily brethren. After an hour’s hard struggle, I was exhausted and choking back tears for the beautiful lives lost. However, I had successfully secured the cube, and I knew that Endou’s delighted smile when he opened this most precious gift would make all the sacrifice worth it.

I had already ascertained Endou’s place of residence thanks to Shikama. It was an apartment in the cluttered neighborhood surrounding the Yoshida Shrine. I set out down Shiga Pass, the trash bag containing the cockroach cube dangling from one hand.

I knew that if I were to deliver the cube in its current state, it would only be construed as garbage and thrown out on the spot. To avoid this outcome, I decided I needed to spruce things up. I stopped by the stationery shop on Shirakawa Street, where I procured a darling red paper bag. It was the kind of thing guaranteed to make the heart of any man, no matter how nihilistic, hearken back to its days of youth. To accompany the bag, I selected a glittering green ribbon. I have no fondness for Christmas, but I am at least familiar with its palette. Finally, I purchased a small card on which to write the name of the sender. In all, the supplies set me back five hundred yen. However, it was a sum I was glad to part with if it meant bringing a smile to my dearest Mr. Endou’s face.

I found a seat along the Philosopher’s Walk and carefully set about assembling my gift. It was painstaking, delicate work. The noon air was brisk and the bench cold against my rear, but the warm sunlight quietly filtering through the cherry trees’ branches aided my hands. I placed the trash bag containing the

cockroach cube into the cute red bag, which I tied tight with the green ribbon. Considering Mr. Endou's gross misconceptions about me, a gift bearing my own name was likely to go unopened. I was thus forced to utilize Mizuo's instead—with some slight modification. I knew that writing her name outright would be fraudulent, so I decided to adjust it ever so slightly, adding a discreet tail to the final *o* such that the end product technically read *Mizua*. In all likelihood, Endou would overlook the tail in his haste and believe the gift to be from her. I carefully filled the card out in immaculate letters. *To Endou, from Mizua.* Once I had combined the card and present, my work was complete.

I placed the prepared gift on the stone bench and stepped one pace back, evaluating its appearance from every angle as an artist might critique his work. Yes. This was perfect. My flawless execution impressed even myself. Not a soul on this earth would suspect the greasy, squirming mass waiting inside. Why, if I were to receive the package myself, I would wholeheartedly believe it sent with love by a chaste, graceful maiden. It was a masterpiece—my best work in years.

I proceeded down Imadegawa Street and into the side streets that crisscrossed the residential neighborhood just east of the Faculty of Engineering. I navigated the densely packed houses with some difficulty, very grateful for the written directions Shikama had provided.

Eventually, I arrived at Endou's address. It was a two-story apartment building of recent construction. Endou lived in a middle unit on the second floor. I approached the building with some trepidation, knowing that if I was to encounter him here, my whole plan would be ruined. Fortunately, Endou appeared to be out. Perhaps he was again with his amateur filmmaker associates, shooting scenes for his pointless movie. I approached Endou's door and hung my gift from the knob. I held my ear close to the paper bag to ascertain the faint writhing and scuttling of its glorious contents, then hastily made my retreat.

Now all I had to do was wait for Endou's response.

I could easily envision him reaching for the bag in clear delight. He'd see the name written on the card, and a fatuous grin would spread across his face.

Goodness, he might mumble under his breath. If she wanted to get me something, she could have just brought it in person.

Oh, the hubris.

Once inside, he might even kneel in *seiza* on the floor, breathing deeply to collect his thoughts. And it would all be in vain. He'd pull open the red paper bag, mind brimming over with visions of a rose-colored future, hands all but trembling with excitement, only to expose the indefatigable, eons-old gleam of life.

The roaches would burst forth from their paper prison to scurry about the room in a wild dance. Endou would attempt to flee, realizing only then what had happened. He'd let out a gasp, tilt his head back, and cast his eyes to the heavens, where he would find my face smiling down with eternal grace.

"Damn you!" he might even groan, like one more hapless, writhing pest among his fellows.

I hoped he would enjoy his chance to experience the whirling, unbridled mysteries of life.

Afterward, I felt the satisfaction of a hard day's work soak in. I made leisurely stops at a few bookshops, drifted happily among the shelves, and then headed home.

Several days had passed since I delivered my lovingly prepared Christmas present, and I had yet to receive a response from Endou. I was beginning to feel a bit disappointed. I'd come up with such a novel idea, and I felt very strongly that it was only proper for Endou to respond in turn.

Or perhaps I was underestimating him. He could be busy toiling away at that very moment, preparing some monstrous ploy meant to thoroughly quash me. I had to remain vigilant.

I continued about my days, ever alert, ever watching for Endou's retaliation. My hands trembled with the excitement of a warrior on the eve of battle.

Tomonao Takayabu, a compatriot of mine since our club days, had been relentlessly inviting me to visit his research lab in the Graduate School of Engineering. He was eager to arrange a private screening of some program called *Kaiketsu Zubat*.

One particular night, I had finally caved and agreed to head over with Shikama.

To be quite honest, Takayabu was far too diligent for his own good. He'd moved on to graduate school and now toiled away on mysterious research projects that defied common comprehension. The lab to which he associated with was located in Building No. 4.

When Shikama and I began our trek across campus, it was already past nine. The trees were spears of pitch erupting from the earth. Florescent light spilled from the windows of Takayabu's lab, lending a dew-kissed glimmer to those leaves closest to the building.

I knew from past visits that his lab on the second floor was crowded with all manner of scientific apparatuses, desks, and computers. As I said, I couldn't begin to fathom what sort of research was being carried out there. I had a vague memory of hearing something about assembling a micron-scale facade of the Phoenix Hall at Byodo Temple in Uji, fashioned entirely out of individually arranged atoms of some specific metal. I wasn't sure whether to believe the story. We lived in an age when two labs could exist side by side in the same department and not have any clue what the other was up to at any given moment. It would be unfair to expect me to understand the contents of Takayabu's research.

Shikama and I walked in to find the desks already pushed aside to make space for the night's screening. A projector sat in the middle of the room, facing one of the white painted walls. Takayabu expected this setup would afford us a viewing atmosphere that a domestic television set could never hope to replicate.

"Good! You're here!" he exclaimed.

I knew from experience that Takayabu was smiling under his beard, though the thick tangle of whiskers made it hard to discern.

Shikama and I set out two lab stools, sat, and immediately crossed our legs, assuming poses of judgment. Shikama opened the aluminum attaché case he carried with him and produced two satsumas, one of which he handed to me. The two of us began to peel and eat the fruit in silence as we glared at Takayabu. Takayabu, for his part, appeared somewhat taken aback by our behavior but ultimately shrugged and returned to prepping the projector.

The lab's lights were extinguished, and the night's feature set in motion. A man clad in a most peculiar costume appeared on the white wall and set about saving the day. It was just then that I felt Shikama's finger poke my side.
"I spotted Mizuo yesterday."
"Where?"
"A neighborhood convenience store. She was all alone and grinning to herself the whole time. That's the sign of a nutcase, you know."
"Hmm."
"I talked with her a bit, too."
"Oh, did you?"
"Yes. And I learned something about our dear Mr. Endou in the process."
"What's that?"
"As we both know, he's been following her around. But it turns out he's doing so without her knowledge. She hasn't the slightest clue."
This surprised me. I glanced sideward, but Shikama's eyes remained fixed on the superhero's antics. He casually popped another piece of fruit into his mouth, now on his second satsuma. His face was more sullen than usual in the harsh white reflection cast by the projector.
"You mean to say she never requested his protection? He's *stalking* her?"
"It's all him. He's playing a one-man game."
Shikama burst out laughing, unable to contain himself any longer.
He continued, "You know, I thought I sensed something strange going on when I first began following him. But I decided not to say anything until I was certain."
I groaned.
Shikama peered over at me and added, "Yesterday's foe is today's friend, or so they say. I must admit I was a bit stricken with grief to hear that my compatriot had been insulted by such a pathetic specimen of a man. A bit tickled, too."
"He won't get away with this," I growled. "Unbelievable. All that arrogance, and he's even worse than I am!"
"In essence," Shikama said, "this means I've been stalking him, who's been in turn stalking you on account of your stalking her, all while he's also stalking her on the side. What a terrifying city we live in, my friend. It's an artist's hellscape depicting the horrors of love and hate."

“Just to be clear, I’m not stalking her. And I never was. I’m merely conducting research, so I’d appreciate it if you’d not group me in with that lovesick degenerate.”
“You aren’t, hmm? And you believe that claim would hold up under police scrutiny?”
“Obviously not.”
“I can’t understand why you didn’t simply ask her about Endou in the first place.”
“Does it sound like I was in any position to contact her? I’ve got her presumed goon hounding me, threatening to call the cops! I have my pride, you know. I thought for certain he was acting on her orders.”
“Hmph. You’ve still got a long ways to go in your quest for a logical mind. You need to redouble your efforts. Eventually, you’ll be able to strike down your irrational emotions and maintain perfect control, just as I can.”
Takayabu leaned forward to whisper, “Psst! What’re you guys talking about? I want in!”
His eyes sparkled with curiosity.
“Silence!” I hissed.
Takayabu looked terribly stung by the reprimand. I almost felt bad for him.

The screening concluded at two in the morning.
Takayabu lived in a building known as the Yusuiso, located in the Shimogamo Izumigawa neighborhood, but tonight he had decided to spend the night in his lab. To someone like me, in agony at the prospect of remaining until evening in my own Faculty of Agriculture research lab, the notion seemed absurd. I couldn’t begin to fathom the mental workings of someone willing to hole himself up at school twenty-four hours a day.
For me, home served as an extension of the brain. It was a place of liberation. I’d often imagined how splendid it would be if I could take my lodgings with me as a snail carries its shell upon its back. I’d be able to brew a cup of my very own coffee at any time, give my favorite teddy bear a squeeze, and spread out on the tatami to enjoy a cigarette. I’d be able to crack open my favorite books whenever I pleased. If confronted by something unpleasant, I could simply retreat into my door and lock the bolt until the offending element went away.

Takayabu walked with us to the doors of Building No. 4 to see us off.
“Let’s all go out for a drink next time,” he suggested. “Ido’s been looking down. We oughtta try cheering him up.”
Shikama peered up at Orion shining high above. “I’m all for grabbing a drink, but I’ll have no part of this endeavor to rouse a man from his sorrows.”
“But he’s our friend!”
“My consolation would be wasted on him. I’ll, of course, pay Ido the admiration he is due. The man is a monument to worldly envy. But beyond that, I intend only to watch where fate takes him and enjoy the show.”
Takayabu furrowed his brow. “That’s a pretty cold way to treat a brother-in-arms.”
“The purpose of our coterie,” declared Shikama resolutely, “is not to offer solace and pat each other on the back. We are samurai.”
Takayabu sighed, but Shikama ignored him, breaking out in impromptu song.
“O young samurai!” he warbled.
He began walking toward Hyakumanben, fading into the darkness among the engineering buildings along with his curious tune.
Shikama would occasionally bandy about the term “samurai,” but I’d yet to hear what, precisely, he meant by the term. It was unclear whether Shikama’s definition shared any common ground with Dr. Inazo Nitobe’s writings on bushido.
“See you next time,” I said to Takayabu, raising a hand in farewell.
And with that, Shikama and I set off in opposite directions.

On the university campus, there are some buildings with research labs that operate on a twenty-four-hour schedule, windows glittering throughout the night. But others are left to sink deep into darkness. It is not a very joyful experience to walk alone among the latter at two in the morning.
I detest unwarranted cowardice. Fear of the dark, however, is a primal human instinct. It is not a thing easily dispelled by reason, even for an elite specimen of humanity such as myself. I am aware of only two effective methods for temporarily ridding the mind of illogical fears. One is to focus intently upon ideas that stir up great feelings of rage. The other is to imagine lurid scenes that incite the carnal passions.

It seemed somewhat disrespectful to walk the grounds of an institution dedicated to higher learning with a head full of lustful fantasies, so I elected instead to ponder Shikama's recent revelation.

I'd been humiliated at Endou's hands. In fact, I would submit that there is nothing more flagrantly demeaning than to be erroneously branded a deviant by someone who is demonstrably one himself. Even more so, considering the motives of a lawless degenerate like Endou are so clearly distinct from my own.

In a small way, it was my own fault. I'd been unobservant. The night Endou had admonished me in Mizuo's parking lot, he was almost certainly there waiting, watching for her arrival.

The threatening letter he sent had also struck me as curious. I'd sensed there was something strange about the man, but I hadn't quite been able to put my finger on it at the time.

In any case, I was elated to have established beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was in no position to criticize me. I felt like Siddhartha walking the perimeter of his lotus pond in paradise. I could, if so inclined, dangle a spider's thread of mercy down to hell for Endou to grasp onto. But I would also be free to cut it loose long before he climbed out.

Forget male solidarity. I hadn't the slightest intention to forgive him.

I surrendered my mind to these thoughts as I walked on, and eventually I found myself in front of the university's Data Processing Center. I felt a sudden, sharp gaze from the shadows, and the words *evil eye* floated to mind.

As mentioned earlier, I'll occasionally become aware of intense scrutiny focused upon me when I'm lost in thought. This time, I boldly glared back at the darkness, my own eyes blazing. I wouldn't stand to have my contemplations interrupted any further.

After a few moments spent scanning the darkness, I noticed several youths were loitering near the entrance of the dark building. All were staring at me.

I felt a wave of panic. I'd only intended to repulse the evil eye with my own storm of fury, but it seemed the youths believed I'd given them the stink eye. I began to blink rapidly as I walked by, feigning innocence.

But as I passed, the youths came toward me. They followed, wordless, fanning out and catching pace until they lined both my sides.

They just happen to be headed in the same direction, I reassured myself.

By nature, I prefer to walk alone. I certainly find no joy in leisurely sauntering abreast men I do not know. Hoping to shake them off and return to my beloved solitude, I hastened my gait. But for some inexplicable reason, they, too, began to walk faster, such that the relative distance between us remained unchanged.

I briefly considered turning and demanding that they state their intentions, but I suspected they would likely reply in the nonchalant fashion of a yakuza or other social miscreant. Something along the lines of, *Hey, man. We're just walking!* So I held my tongue. Demanding that they state their intentions would most likely bring the situation to a head.

Lips tight, I further quickened my pace. The strategy continued to fail. I began to feel suffocated, as if a great black garbage bag had descended over my head. There were four of them, and they appeared to be of high school or perhaps college age. I hadn't had a chance to observe their faces closely, so I had no detailed impression. Either way, the feel of their four huge, shadowy bodies lurking closely at my sides was most unpleasant.

I passed through the campus gate and into the surrounding residential neighborhood, my unwanted entourage still in tow. I concluded that these four must be some of the fabled Kyoto University student hunters. In recent years, I'd heard tell of students attacked on campus late at night. I'd assumed those were nothing more than rumors.

In the city, there had been sprees of assaults on the homeless or on middle-aged men. Apparently, the waves of this fad had finally made their way into the university.

Honestly, I would think there are many other, better forms of entertainment. But I suppose I only thought so because *I* was the prey. Protesting their actions would be akin to a zebra admonishing a lion in hot pursuit to eat more vegetables instead.

To the hunters, my qualms were irrelevant. If anything, the injustice of the situation only heightened their thrill. Only in the worlds of boys' comics and a select few competitive sports do people still rejoice in challenging those stronger than themselves. In the real world, humans toy with the weak and derive unparalleled delight from the process.

Still, swallowing that harsh pill did little to ease my agony in the present, hunted as I was. I needed to come up with a plan.

Technically speaking, I wasn't even a current student. I was on hiatus! The least these fellows could do was wait until I'd formally resumed my studies. Unfortunately, they didn't seem the type to be swayed by logic.

Worse yet, I knew the present contents of my wallet added up to five hundred and fifty yen, a sum unlikely to secure my safe passage. In fact, if the ruffians were willing to leave me be for a measly five hundred and fifty yen, I would've refused for the sake of my pride. But that was beside the point. No amount of money was going to convince them to abandon the hunt. Once they caught me, they'd be free to empty my pockets anyway. I suppose there's a lesson in that: If you're going to be hunted, it's better to be broke than loaded.

At any rate, this meant that plotting an escape was a far more productive use of my time.

Once we reached the quiet of Shiga Pass, I executed my well-honed sidestepping technique, slipped free of their encirclement, and vanished into an alleyway stretching off to my right.

It was a very narrow alley, eaves pressing in on both sides. Consequently, it was difficult to surmise exactly where it might lead. But logically, I knew it had to connect to the vast network of tiny alleys that permeated the area. There was a chance I'd lose my pursuers if I ran for all I was worth—so I did.

As I fled, I kicked over several potted plants decorating the entryways of houses. A sudden guilt flooded me—what if it was a coincidence, and the idea that these four men were out to get me was just another product of my excitable imagination? I flicked a quick glance over my shoulder and was relieved to find all four barreling down the alley, a black whirlwind hot on my heels.

One of my pursuers tripped on a potted plant. He went crashing to the ground, causing the others behind him to stumble and crash as well. They lay in a heap, and I heard a series of growls and curses accompany the unmistakable clatter of broken pottery.

Without thinking, I voiced my exultation. This was met with more enraged curses and threats on my life. Celebration was clearly premature.

I doubted the men would actually kill me, but then again, anything was possible in the heat of the moment. If they got caught up and murdered me, no amount of complaint or criticism would bring me back to life.

I grabbed another nearby potted plant and hurled it in their general direction, then sprinted off again. Do mind, dear readers, that my flight wasn't fueled by cowardice. If anything, I was thinking of my assailants' welfare. I didn't want them to commit unintentional murder and have to suffer the attending consequences. That was why I was fleeing. This was not cowardice; it was mercy.

I hadn't exercised so vigorously in quite some time, and already I was sweating profusely. I glanced up at the thin ribbon of night sky visible above the narrow alleyway. It was clear and filled with stars. My breath pulsed in hot, concentrated bursts. I wondered why the residents here kept so many damn pots outside.

As I continued to run, navigating the maze of alleyways, it dawned on me that I no longer had any idea where I was. One would think I wouldn't be alone in this dilemma. That is to say, if I myself didn't know where I was, surely my pursuers didn't, either. Unfortunately, that proved not to be the case. Every time I tried to pause and lean against a wall to catch my breath, I heard the four men's stifled, breathless exchanges close behind. I was forced onward, running, panting, darting from one alley to the next.

My poor capacity for quick thinking became patently clear when one alley I chose turned out to be a dead end. A sense of hopelessness descended upon me. I knew this feeling. I'd felt it before, when I sat for the entrance exam at a certain university that shall remain unnamed and took my first look at the math section.

I stood unmoving at the end of the cul-de-sac. Worn wooden fences flanked both sides. Before me was an imposing concrete wall, towering far above my head and conscientiously topped with a string of barbed wire. One could feel the landowner's desire to teach trespassers the literal meaning of the term *bloodbath*. At the base of the concrete wall was a small iron door—the kind of thing a nervous white rabbit might dart through, late for his date with the queen.

I grabbed the handle of the tiny door and pulled to no avail. It could have been frozen solid for how fast it held. Behind me, I heard the four men drawing ever nearer. I began to wonder if there was a bloodhound among their party; it would explain their dogged persistence. In any case, a mixture of breathlessness and rage had reduced their communications to a series of primal grunts, and the grunting sounded dreadfully close. I certainly couldn't retrace my steps. I'd run straight into their waiting arms, which would proceed to pummel me to a fine pulp.

At this point, I'd sapped a great deal of their time and energy. Honestly, there was no telling what they'd do once they got their hands on me now. I didn't want to think about it. Unfortunately, it's the unwelcome thoughts that tend to kick one's imagination into overdrive. Mine began to paint a sweeping panorama of self-torture for my mind's eye. There I was, wrapped up tight in a bamboo mat by my pursuers, about to be hurled to a watery grave at the bottom of the Kamo River. Or perhaps they'd leave me dangling stark naked from the university clock tower. Maybe they'd tie me up with bondage ropes using the tortoise shell pattern and then dump me on the asphalt at the center of the Hyakumanben intersection to await my fate.

I pressed my back to the concrete wall, mentally facing off against my approaching assailants. All the while, I continued to flex and strain my gray matter, trying to squeeze out some genius way to escape from the imminent confrontation. It was failing spectacularly. All that came to mind were more images of myself nude and dangling to and fro in the wind.

I searched the pockets of my coat—a very special coat my grandfather had left to me. The only unexpected find was the mangled rind of a satsuma. I turned my attention to my surroundings, searching, grasping at straws. I spotted a lonely, desiccated pile of dog feces resting in one corner. I grabbed it. I didn't know what I was going to do with it, but my search for straw had at least yielded shit.

It was the dead of freezing night during the busiest month of the year. Orion glittered overhead, my brain filled with adrenaline, each cheek unleashed rivers of sweat, and my lips were pursed into the absurd grin of a zebra. In my right hand, the satsuma peel. In my left, the dog shit. I curled my arms before me into the imposing stance of a Nioh. I was Musashibo Benkei, riddled with

arrows atop the bridge. But unlike the great hero, my legs trembled, and my heart seemed like it would give out any second. I wanted to cry but couldn't, and tears weren't going to help my situation anyway. I tilted my head back to the heavens, offering one final plea to the great shrines of Fushimi Inari, Kitano Tenman, Yoshida, and Kitashirakawa Tenjin to keep me safe. Please spare me from the bamboo mat. But that doesn't mean I'd rather be stripped naked. Please spare me from the stripping, too.

"Hey!" hissed a voice. "This way!"

I looked to my side. The iron door, once closed tight, was now ajar. A man's face peeked through. Though my brain failed to process his identity in the moment, the ratty stubble at his chin seemed awfully familiar.

Once I was on the other side of the locked iron door, I stayed very still and listened. I heard a flurry of heavy footfalls, and for a time, my pursuers seemed to mill about, inspecting the dead end. Finally, they departed.

Endou, my unexpected savior, began quietly walking away. He flicked his chin, signaling me to follow. The iron door had led to a quaint garden, property of a home that had probably stood in the area for generations. Through the center wound a stone path with thick shrubbery on both sides. Lights were spaced throughout the garden, their orange glow leaking through the clumps of trees. Large ceramic pots lined the path at regular intervals, each bearing an identical pattern of umber stripes and filled to the brim with water. I was still clutching the satsuma rind and the desiccated hunk of dog feces; as we passed one pot, I furtively dumped them in the water and washed my hands.

"Hurry up," Endou whispered in exasperation.

I scowled. My gratitude for his valiant rescue had already evaporated.

We reached the other side of the estate and passed through a wooden door, emerging just to the rear of Endou's apartment building.

He ascended his building's external metal stairway with loud, rhythmic clangs. The idea of obediently following Endou irked me greatly. For a moment, I considered turning up my nose and heading home on the spot. Still, if he was inviting me into his apartment, it likely meant he desired to speak with me man-to-man. Declining was tantamount to fleeing from a duel like a coward, a prospect that irked me even more.

He slid his key into the lock and opened the door, again urging me forward with a flick of his chin. I reluctantly ascended the steps and entered his abode.

Endou's main room was a stately six mats in size, with a separate kitchen and a private bathroom. A large bookcase dominated one wall of the main room; on it were all sorts of texts and reference materials regarding filmmaking, along with numerous ponderous treatises on philosophy, thick tomes full of legal precedents, and various prep materials for the bar exam. Another wall displayed a Czechoslovakian movie poster. Next to the poster was a large corkboard to which Endou had tacked scribbled ideas for scenes and stylish photographs clipped from magazines in tasteful disarray. Heaps of unusual equipment rested on the floor against the remaining two walls. I didn't recognize any of it and so assumed it was related to filmmaking.

The whole place had an inscrutable, irritating quality about it that befitted a man like Endou.

I wandered to the center of the living room and plopped myself down on the laminate wood flooring. Over in the kitchen, Endou was busy folding a coffee filter with precise, practiced movements. While he waited for the coffee to brew, he leaned against the sink and vacantly looked down to one side. He carried himself with a degree of ease I hadn't seen before, as if he was emboldened here in the familiar environs of his fortress. It even lent his ratty goatee an air of refinement, which I found very odd.

At long last, the coffee was ready. He carried it over and sat down as well. He remained silent. I wasn't about to lose this psychological game of chicken, so I didn't speak, either. I did, however, pick up the cup of coffee he had set on the floor for me. I tried a sip and found it to be extremely palatable. This only heightened my irritation, and I began to take great, frustrated gulps.

The faux wood flooring had my buttocks growing colder by the minute. I began to worry that if I stayed too long, my hemorrhoids might flare up again. It was a pertinent concern, as just the previous month, I'd been completely incapacitated by the perfidious piles for the second time in my college career.

At the same time, I knew that if I allowed Endou to seize the conversational initiative because I'd capitulated to some trivial concern like rectal wellness, I'd shame not only myself but all my forebears. I wouldn't be able to look my ancestors in the eyes when I eventually made my way to the other realm. So

with a great surge of determination, I dragged my attention up from my lower half and glared directly into Endou's face.
Come to think of it, there really was no reason for me to display diffidence or feel beholden. I hadn't asked for his help. Everyone knows that charity exercised solely for the purpose of securing another's gratitude is no charity at all. If Endou intended to suggest that I now owed him a favor in return for my rescue, I had an earful for him about the measure of true valor.
Frankly, I hadn't the slightest intention to thank him. I would keep my defenses tight. So long as I allowed Endou no opportunity to worm his way in, my superior standing would remain secure.
I continued to drink my coffee in silence. Endou rose to his feet and began to pull equipment out from one of the room's piles, which he then deftly assembled. Finally, he flicked the switch to extinguish the apartment's lights. I braced myself, anticipating a cowardly assault under the cover of darkness. Instead, one wall of the apartment was bathed in sudden light, and I heard the whir of an antiquated projector stirring to life. A grainy film began to play on the wall's white surface.

The film appeared to show the inside of a train car. Sunlight flooded in through the windows, giving the scene a hazy, dreamlike quality. The hand straps on the car's ceiling gently waved from side to side with the motion of the train. Beyond them, one could see into the next car, to where a girl was sitting.
It was Mizuo, all on her own, gaze fixed on the outside world.
The scene ended there, and a new one began. Now we saw a tiny, unattended train station surrounded by a thicket of trees. The camera passed through the trees and emerged into a vast meadow. Far in the distance, Mizuo crossed the grass with ever so light footfalls. She almost seemed to float over the ground. Beyond her tiny figure loomed a great structure that pierced the sky itself.
It was the Tower of the Sun.

The film ended; the screen returned to white. The two of us sat in silence for some time, Endou with his head hanging, apparently flummoxed. I sensed he was toying with a question in his mind, like a nettlesome puzzle ring that just won't come undone. I felt a stirring of sympathy at this pitiful sight. The feeling

grew until presently a geyser of mercy threatened to erupt in the pit of my heart. I quickly slammed a lid over it.

Why, I reflected bitterly, am I so prone to getting swept up by emotion these days?

Shikama's recent admonishment echoed in my mind. Eventually, you'll be able to strike down your irrational emotions and maintain perfect control, just as I can.

Whatever Endou's question was, I firmly resolved not to provide an answer. I wouldn't give him any helpful information whatsoever.

"How did you shoot that?" I demanded. "And when?"

He ignored my inquiries, instead slowly issuing one of his own. "I need to know something. What's the connection between the tower and her?"

"Why are you asking *me*?"

"Because you're pretty much the only lead I have."

"Ask Mizuo."

"Our relationship is…complicated." He gave a wry smile and sipped at his coffee. "But there's some deep link between the Tower of the Sun and her, isn't there?"

"A link? Whatever are you talking about?"

"Something big. Something important. Like a thread of fate."

"Oh, please. Spare me your nonsense."

He glared at me. "So you're not gonna share what you know, huh?"

"I'm only asking you to speak in rational, logical terms."

"Fine. Would you please tell me why she's so fixated on the tower?"

"I haven't the foggiest. Again, if you'd like an answer, I suggest you take the matter up with her."

He sighed and dropped his head in apparent defeat, staring at the dark contents of his cup. I pulled out a cigarette.

"Please don't smoke in here."

The projector continued to cast its eerie glow upon us. I considered the situation I was in calmly and objectively—and found it unbearably odd that the two of us should be sitting here across from each other in silence.

In a soft voice, Endou admitted, "I guess it is pretty weird for me to be asking for your help."

“Yes. Quite.”

Perhaps, dear readers, you have not heard of the Tower of the Sun.

A very long time ago, when I was still a cute, huggable little thing fawned over by anyone and everyone I encountered, my family was living in an apartment building in suburban Osaka. It was just a short walk to Commemorative Park, the former site of the 1970 Japan World Exposition. On the weekends, my parents liked to take me to that park, where I reportedly spent all day running among the trees and rolling around in the grassy meadows. Consequently, one could say that my very identity is rooted in scenes of the park’s environs. And looming over each and every such scene, dominating the surroundings with its commanding stare, is the Tower of the Sun.

I didn’t learn the name of the Tower’s designer, Taro Okamoto, until I was much older. Even today, I know little about the man and feel no urge to discover more. For me, the Tower simply exists. Its presence is so overbearing that I cannot comprehend it as something of human design. As far as I am concerned, it soared in unannounced from an alternate dimension, descending upon the earth where it will remain fixed, ever beyond the tinkering of our hands. In my mind, the Tower has nothing to do with the man named Taro Okamoto, or with the great celebrations of the World Expo that took place years before my birth, or with attempts to make bold, visual statements about a new, postwar Japan. The Tower merely rises from its sea of green to reign over all.

A single encounter is sufficient to overwhelm any mortal mind. It is unreal, both in shape and scope. Not a single part fails to disturb the human psyche, from the inordinately smooth curves of its trunk to the amorphous, threatening arms jutting out at both sides. Its three faces bewilder: the golden saucer that glitters at the Tower’s apex; the ashen grimace that lurks in the midsection; and the sinister, two-dimensional black countenance at its back. And above all is the Tower’s astonishing, otherworldly size.

I imagine many a visitor approaches, scratches his head, and mumbles, “What *is* this thing…?” And then he departs, satisfied that he’s seen the tower and grasped its significance. He returns home and tells all his acquaintances that, yes, the Tower of the Sun is a peculiar thing, as peculiar as we’ve all heard. He

casually tells his friends that they really ought to visit once to see it for themselves.

Such a reaction is to my mind wholly, utterly lacking.

You must go back. Two, three, four times. Journey to the Tower to stand at its feet. As the bus nears the park, you'll find yourself pressed upon by an indescribable, overbearing presence that grows more palpable with each visit. You think to yourself, *We must be getting close. It'll pop out over the trees at any moment.* Anxiety churns in the pit of your stomach.

And then, the Tower is there. The moment it enters your sight, you know that this is a drug that begets no tolerance.

The dullard thinks, Wow! The novelty never wears thin.

Such a trite assessment is an insult. The Tower is infinitely bizarre. It is infinitely terrifying, infinitely magnificent, and infinitely off-putting. The next time you visit, dread's cold fingers will grip tighter yet. You come again by bus or by train, you feel the Tower's appearance near at hand, and the fear sets in. And as the golden head finally rises from the treetops, you know your fear is justified. The Tower does not disappoint.

In our mortal minds, the Tower only grows larger. It never shrinks.

This is why you cannot visit only once. You must go again and again and tremble as its interdimensional, cosmic presence fills your breast. We of our world are compelled to fall to our knees before the great Tower, grip the sides of our heads, and cry over and over, "What *is* this thing?!"

It is the entrance to another plane.

I grew to love the park and venerate the Tower. Even now as a college student, I'll at times head to Shijo Kawaramachi and jump aboard the Hankyu Railway for an impromptu ride to Commemorative Park.

My initial courtship of Mizuo included frequent quiet dates in places with an air of history, such as the shrines of Fushimi Inari and Shimogamo. But eventually, I felt compelled to take her to the place I most adore in all the world.

When we boarded the bus that runs to the park from Ibaraki Station, Mizuo sat gazing out the window. When the Tower at long last revealed itself among the sea of green, Mizuo pressed her face against the glass like a frog.

"Wow…," she exclaimed. "Oh, wow… Just look at it!"

She was captivated. Even after we'd disembarked and had ample opportunity to observe the Tower together, she continued to mill about the base by herself for a great while. I let her be, settling in on a bench across the park, enjoying a peaceful smoke and the sight of her, now a tiny mote bending back with all her might in an attempt to observe the point where the great Tower pierces the sky.

She was paying me little mind, but I was not rankled. I know that the Tower overshadows me—and that I am but naught in its presence.

At long last, Mizuo returned to my side, face flushed.

"It's incredible," she said. "Forget wonders of the world. This should be designated a wonder of the *universe*!"

After that, we sat on the bench in the middle of the grassy meadow, heads tilted back to take in the regal Tower rising up beyond the trees. We'd timed our journey to arrive just as the park gates opened, and there wasn't another soul in sight.

A chill wind playfully brushed our cheeks. I whistled a quiet, aimless tune and surveyed the circumference of the meadow. It was lined with green forest that rustled with freshness and moisture, as if we sat in the base of a vast, shallow dish filled to its brim with cool liquid.

We'd been absentmindedly staring at the Tower for some time when my cell phone began to ring. It was Shikama. We exchanged a bit of casual conversation.

It did not take long for Shikama's maddening, knifelike insight to work its magic. I began to sense that he'd picked up not only on the fact that I was presently sitting in Commemorative Park but also that I was there on a date.

"Ah. You're busy," he announced. "Sorry to intrude."

He cut the call without warning. Five minutes later, I received a text message.

All it read was: Traitor. I won't forget this.

In the blink of an eye, Mizuo's passion had outstripped even my own. She'd independently declared the Tower of the Sun a wonder of the universe and began to pursue it with the force of a surging wave.

She purchased a small replica to enshrine on her bookcase. A tiny Tower of the Sun hung from a wrist strap attached to the corner of her cell phone. She

began seeking out back issues of art magazines that had featured articles about the Tower, and her collection grew day by day.

The second time we visited Commemorative Park, Mizuo's cheeks were flushed once again. She barged onto the portion of lawn marked off-limits to visitors, hoping to photograph the Tower from every possible angle. She beamed from ear to ear as she fumbled with the new camera. She looked as if she'd stumbled upon an unknown treasure.

Mizuo and I had never been in the habit of taking photographs together. Consequently, her photos of the Tower soon outnumbered those of me by a factor of thirty to one. But that did not bother me. The Tower is great. Mizuo is to be commended for having grasped that—and for devoting body and soul to extol its greatness. I understood and accepted that truth.

Endou's apartment behind me, I proceeded along the dim alleys leading out to Imadegawa Street, still occasionally haunted by the specters of hunters hot on my tail. At last I made it out to the main street, where I breathed a sigh of relief. From here, I could make my way home on the city's wide, brightly lit boulevards, where danger to my person seemed far less likely. When I reached the comfort of the Kitashirakawa Betto intersection, I offered another silent prayer to the Fushimi Inari, Kitano Tenman, Yoshida, and Kitashirakawa Tenjin shrines, thanking them for delivering me from evil.

It had been an exceedingly long day. As I trudged my way up the final stretch of hill toward my lodgings, a belated wave of anger washed over me. Yes, I was admittedly dependent upon modern civilization, but I was beholden to no one, aside from perhaps my parents and the global ecology. Here I was, living a completely harmless life, ensconced like a hermit crab, only to be branded a creep that harasses women. Not only that, but my accuser was himself a verified stalker!

My beloved Manami had been stolen. I'd been chased for sport by youth with nothing better to do than torment hapless college students. I had a deluded debt collector constantly knocking on my door. And all the while, Saint Christmas loomed ever nearer.

All of it was most unpleasant. I suffered a cruel reality. Though I wished to be left alone, I was bothered on a daily basis by the people I least wished to see.

The people most important to me, who I would have liked to hear from, paid me no mind at all. (Please note, dear readers, that I do not in any way mean to imply that I longed to have Mizuo reach out to me.)

I plodded down the dark hallway to my room like a criminal led to his cell. I was exhausted.

When I reached my door, I found a cute little paper bag hanging from the knob. I peered inside, only to find another, smaller green bag, this one adorned at the neck with a most resplendent red ribbon. A card was attached, reading simply *Mizuo*.

My heart lurched. It threatened to speed off uncontrolled. I drew a deep breath to calm myself, plucked the bag from the doorknob with measured poise, and entered my lodgings. Moments ago, my spine had wobbled like a willow branch. Now it was as straight as the trunk of a dignified redwood.

Inside, I knelt in *seiza* on the tatami floor, briefly meditating to collect my thoughts. I expelled all foolish expectations. The task before me required a mind as clear as the waters of the Kibune Valley. I knew myself disciplined enough not to lose my cool over whatever trivial token waited inside, but I needed to be absolutely sure. No matter the nature of Mizuo's gift, or any words that accompanied it, I would accept them with dispassionate composure. I had no expectation or desire for her to suggest a rekindling of our relationship. But if she did happen to insinuate getting back together, I supposed I could entertain the idea.

I was ready for whatever this packaged contained.

Bring it on.

I slowly tugged the red ribbon. As the bag's neck loosened, a hypnotic gleaming arrested my eyes. It was somehow familiar—I'd seen this just days prior, hadn't I? There was a sudden rustling, and then, before I could react, a torrent of tiny black shadows sprang happily from the open bag.

My exhausting day ended with a groan—a mix of astonishment and imprecation. I was given no further opportunity to speak or to see. My world was consumed by the oily brown sheen and deafening flutter of countless wings, bursting with the indefatigable, eons-old gleam of life.

When I finally escaped and found air, I screamed into the night, "Damn you, Endou!"

Once, Shikama invited me to his lodgings to watch a movie. It was one of those classic coming-of-age tales. The protagonists were in high school, and their worlds revolved around the school sports team they all happened to be a part of. All the standard tropes were present: The boys fought, they helped each other through tough times, and at the end, they rallied together for a shot at the regional championship. In short, they were living the fiery days of youth to the fullest.

On their final night together, at a summer retreat just before they'd all head their separate ways, one of the characters sighed and said, "I wish we could stay like this forever."

Shikama and I had been watching the screen from the floor, smoking cigarettes and lounging like unmovable, rain-swollen logs. But upon hearing that particular line, Shikama bolted upright.

Quietly, he offered his rebuttal. "Oh, grow up!"

Though we had embarked on our crusade eager and willing, it was true that at times we grew weary.

Mr. Endou's cowardly gift had transformed my beautiful abode into a sprawling Blattodean Empire.

That night, I'd been forced to flee and seek refuge from my friend Shikama. I am not one to be shaken by any threat, but I have to admit my inability to sleep with roaches crawling over me. I'm afraid the experience of having their tiny limbs stroke every part of my body would be far too sensuous.

Shikama displayed a complete inability to empathize with this particular tragedy. Upon hearing that my lodgings were now overrun by roaches, he clutched his sides and fell to the floor in laughter, rolling about for a full thirty minutes. I had inadvertently discovered the outer limits of our friendship.

The following morning, I purchased a commercial pest-control product of the fumigant variety and steeled my heart for the battle to reclaim my home. I returned to my building and opened my door just enough to peek inside. The entirety of the dim interior writhed with ancient life. I ignited the fuse of my poisonous grenade, slid it inside, and promptly retreated.

I do not wish to imagine the subsequent smoky hellscape or the screams of the countless souls sealed inside.

Hours later, when I returned from a full day's work at the sushi restaurant, I found every speck of my four-and-a-half-mat floor littered with roach corpses. If one squinted, it almost looked like a luxurious brown shag carpet. Additional corpses were wedged at random among the slats of my window blinds.

I tiptoed my way to the kitchen and was left speechless by what may very well be the most revolting thing I'll ever witness. There, in the sink, was the prior day's half-eaten cup of ramen, its remaining broth almost obscured for the number of roach bodies that crowded its surface. It had been a cup of *tonkotsu* ramen—pork bone broth—and the soup's thick, oily film now clung to the bodies of the dead pests, almost as if they'd been part of the original meal and I'd been greedily slurping them up along with the noodles. (To be clear, I would rather perish of hunger than eat a bowl of roach-topped ramen.)

More dead roaches littered my desk and the area behind my television. When I had gathered them all, the mound of corpses filled an entire garbage bag. I propped the door open and next set about vacuuming up the various legs and bits of wings that still clung to the tatami. I prayed their recently departed souls would find rest, but also made a point of being *very* thorough in my cleaning.

It was the dead of night. More precisely, it was the hour of the Ox, of which roughly three-quarters had passed. I found myself standing just south of the dense forest of Saginomori. The sky was clear like a sheet of ice.

At this particular hour of the night, the world is said to be so quiet that even the foliage slumbers. Still, when one lives in a city, it's easy to forget the true meaning of such words. The convenience store resting on the corner of Kitashirakawa Betto shines its harsh florescent lights twenty-four hours a day. The bookstores are still packed with patrons at three in the morning, standing in the aisles flicking through unpurchased texts. Strange, modified automobiles zip along Mikage Street and up Yamanaka Pass for midnight communes with alien life. Wherever one looks, the city's denizens of the night mill about ceaselessly, for reasons unknown.

I do not know if the foliage truly slumbers as the hour of the Ox draws to a close, but humanity certainly resists. Realizing we're out of food, we run through the dark of the night to visit the convenience store and gorge on steamed buns with cheese. We head to the bookstore at two in the morning to find our friends perusing magazine articles about underground starlets, happy to discuss the day's gossip.

In a life wrapped in fluorescent radiance, the hour of the Ox loses its eerie mystique. I, at least, had forgotten all about it.

It was only on rare occasions, such as when I spent a full day cycling the circumference of Lake Biwa with Shikama or when I accepted a dare to walk into the Shirataki Tunnel alone, that I rediscovered the unmitigated fear that darkness commands.

The forest ahead was pitch-black, and I could make out little in the darkness. I recognized the location only because I happened to spot the words SAGINOMORI SHRINE engraved on a large stone pillar at the forest's border. I knew there should be a small hiking trail that led in toward the shrine, but I could not discern it from the surrounding bush.

To my east was the inky ridgeline of the mountains. In the sky, the moon was a sliver of fine, curved wire. A vegetable field stretched between the nearest residential neighborhoods and me, as if determined to cut me off from the civilized world. The field was barren, save for a few upturned cabbages that had long since withered from exposure to the cold northern gales.

An embankment along the far edge of the field served as the foundation for a narrow road, and I could faintly make out a white guardrail running alongside it. Beyond that, the lights of the area's residences twinkled in the night. I also spotted one lone streetlight standing to the side of the guardrail. It cast a forlorn glow that seemed liable to go out at any moment.

As I studied the streetlight, I became aware of a two-car Eizan train approaching from the direction of Ichijoji. It followed the guardrail, sliding along the narrow farm road and heading in the direction of Manshu Temple. Light leaked from its windows into the surrounding night, gently illuminating the guardrail and the surrounding land.

I began walking, cutting my way across the field. When I reached the far end, I scrambled up the embankment, hopped the guardrail, and looked to my left.

The train was escaping into the night, squeezing into the darkness of a tiny unlit alley. I chased after it, clouds of white spilling from my lips.

We were approaching town. Aged stone walls lined both sides of the way, pressing in without mercy. The train continued to roll forward slowly with barely enough room to pass. Little patches of foliage poking above the walls seemed to fade in and out of nothingness as the lit windows of the train passed by.

The townscape became an endless array of twists and turns. I'd never walked these streets and did not know them. I felt as if I were being led through a life-size maze. The train rolled effortlessly, as if tracks were being laid wherever it went, and it began to pull farther and farther ahead of me.

I saw it turn left at a dim crossroads, but when I finally managed to reach the intersection, I was too late. I'd lost sight of it. I rushed a few steps down the train's apparent path, but it was hopeless. Still, I pushed onward. When the alley turned out to be a dead end, I doubled back and followed a branch to the right. This alley was lined with a thick temple wall on the right and private residences on the left. It was roughly paved—little more than a mishmash of stones lined upon the ground. At one point I came across an armoire set out in the open air. There was a flower vase atop it, along with a handwritten sign reading, *Free to take*.

Eventually, I reached the end of this alley, too, which ran right up to the entryway of another private residence.

I continued down a steep flight of stairs to my left as if pulled along by some unknown force. More tiny homes packed the sides of the stairway, and the narrow path at the bottom made a sharp, nearly ninety-degree turn to the right. It seemed that the maze might never end—and that the alleyways would twist on through the city, deeper and deeper. Surely the Eizan couldn't pass through here. The realization left me irritated and bitter.

I made another right turn and found the way ahead blocked by a deep canal. On the opposite bank, a road ran parallel to the waterway. The road stretched on as far as I could see in either direction, lined with the same residential clutter I'd witnessed so far. Every home had its windows fastened tight, with no hint of light inside. But just then, their faces caught a white glow from some outside source.

I checked the surface of the canal. The water carried a reflection of bright rectangles—train windows—sliding steadily in my direction. The Eizan had reappeared. Now it was following the road on the opposite bank, headed north. I stood still and watched it pass. Inside one window, I caught sight of Mizuo, who was gazing absentmindedly through the glass at the outside world, perhaps watching the current of the canal. She'd always enjoyed the sight of running water.

I do not know whether she saw me standing there on the wrong side of the bank, breathing hard from my exertion, or the staccato plume of white smoke rising into the chill night air.

I shall now write of Tomonao Takayabu.

We first met in May of my initial year of college, a period of fresh-faced, mortifying innocence too embarrassing to bear remembering. However, I shall never forget the astonishment that accompanied my first glimpse of Takayabu.

I'd been formally accepted into that certain university sports club and was attending my first weekend meeting. Those of us new to the club had yet to establish any friendships, so we each stood isolated, quivering as the upperclassmen swept their eyes to and fro in harsh appraisal. My own eyes were also shifting about the room, desperately seeking someone I could latch onto, when they happened to alight upon a most singular presence.

He was a giant. A creature measuring a full two meters in height, and he was clad in a jacket of dubious taste, lined with an astonishing number of pockets. The top of his head resembled a roc's nest. Every part of his jaw from chin to cheek was covered with dense stubble like iron sand. His eyes shone with excessive curiosity.

I felt certain I'd stumbled across some guardian beast who had occupied a corner of the club room since time immemorial. He radiated an aura impossible for any mortal man. He was a monster. One glimpse of the beast, and I lost all hope for safe passage through my college career. Creatures like that preyed upon the weak. Their eyes sought out trembling youths like me and thought nothing of trampling us beneath their giant claws. A dizzying, dark future unfolded before my eyes, and I very nearly fainted on the spot.

However, when it came time for the new membership to offer self-introductions, the unthinkable occurred. The beast took a step forward and announced, “Hi. My name is Tomonao Takayabu.”

I couldn’t believe it. This monster whose appearance spoke of half a decade spent sitting in a cave at Cape Muroto, features roughened by the harsh winds and surf, was the same age as me! I found that exceedingly hard to accept. I began to suspect that some indescribable evil was nested inside his soul. It was the only explanation I could devise for his warped exterior, and as a natural result, I avoided interaction with him to the greatest extent possible. His was a mystery that far outstripped my then-limited powers of comprehension.

It would be a great while yet—a year and a half, to be precise—before I grasped the Sophoclean tragedy of Takayabu’s nature. But eventually, my eyes were pried open to the truth. A single beam of light descended from heaven, piercing the storm clouds that had heretofore obscured my understanding. I saw that inside the ogre’s body was trapped the delicate soul of a yearning maiden. His giant frame was a cruel excess thrust upon him by genetic chance. His strange multi-pocketed jacket was but a beloved possession he favored for its convenience. The roc’s nest was an extreme case of bedhead, and the perpetual five-o’clock shadow was in actuality quite charming. His eyes shone with innocence, and they were in fact very round and cherubic, almost to the point that one might call them cute.

True, Takayabu did possess an immense physical strength. He was slightly eccentric. But he was certainly not dangerous. The man was a saint largely misunderstood by the outside world. He was kind and sensitive, fiercely loyal in friendship, and diligent about his schoolwork. He hid a formidable intelligence, read countless books, and kept all potential female partners at arm’s length. He had a free and confident command of knowledge on all things military, history, natural science, computing, and anime. Takayabu walked the path of his choosing with his head held high.

I’ve heard many tales of the fabled “super nerd,” but Takayabu remains the first and only specimen I’ve ever encountered.

Takayabu resided in the Shimogamo Izumigawa neighborhood, bound on the east by the slowly flowing Takano River and on the west by the dense north-to-

south stretch of natural forest known as Tadasu-no-mori. It was an area where one opened windows to sounds of birdsong rather than traffic, far removed from the hustle and bustle of Kyoto. The physicist Hideki Yukawa had once resided in one of the area's old mansions.

To get to Takayabu's building, one first had to follow a narrow alleyway whose entrance was secreted away among the rows of old homes. Wooden fences pressed in on both sides as the alley twisted and turned its way into the neighborhood's depths. Some stretches were bathed in deep shadow by the treetops poking up and over the fencing. In all, it lent the way to Takayabu's apartment building the air of a hidden passage known only to a select few. You felt as if you were en route to some fabled den of vice, your excitement getting the better of you as you imagined wine and women in the garden of bliss ahead. But when you emerged from the alley, you were greeted not by a line of bunny girls, arms signaling the way to an adult playground, but rather by Takayabu's quiet abode, the Shimogamo Yusuiso.

Each time I made the trek over and laid eyes upon the building, the first thought to enter my mind was: *Ah. It's still standing.*

According to urban legend, the building had existed since antiquity, partially destroyed only once during the Onin War of 1467, shortly after which it was reconstructed and remained to this day. Architecturally speaking, Yusuiso was a typical two-story wooden building. However, numerous unplanned expansions over the years had distorted it into a grotesque structural mess resembling a natural rather than a manmade design. The ground floor jutted out substantially on the eastern side, like the distended abdomen of some ailing biological organism. I'd heard that this cryptic, bloated addition contained the living quarters of the building's landlord, but I'd never confirmed it—nor even the landlord's existence—with my own eyes.

Takayabu lived in the second unit on the ground floor.

One of his four walls was occupied with a bookcase, the poor thing packed nearly to bursting with Takayabu's extensive collection. Another wall was a mess of audiovisual equipment, the cords and attachments so tangled they'd woven together into a giant biomechanical construct. At the third wall was a small desk on which rested the computer Takayabu had constructed himself

from parts accumulated over time. The device remained powered on in perpetuity.

It's often said that a person can be understood through a glimpse of his living quarters. The sense I got from Takayabu's was that of intense and exhilarating intellectual curiosity.

The first time I visited Takayabu's lodgings, I found my friend hunched over his coffee table, hands deftly sorting and assembling an array of tiny ink black objects.

Peering over his shoulder, I inquired, "What, may I ask, are those?"

"Parts for a wooden model kit. It's a replica of a device used in physics experiments. You know, like in a lab. At least, it will be once I'm done putting it together."

He motioned toward another corner of the apartment, adding, "There're some finished ones on display over there."

I looked in the direction indicated and found an array of tiny instruments atop a stack of old textbooks. Like the one currently in Takayabu's hands, they were fashioned of wood. But they'd also been painted and varnished so carefully that they gleamed like metal. It was fine work. According to Takayabu, they were all re-creations of lab equipment one might have observed in high school physics lectures during the Meiji Era. Of course, being fashioned of wood, they were not actually functional and could thus be used for no purpose beyond decorating the room of a hobbyist.

"I know they don't do much," Takayabu said, now fiddling with another bit of wood, "but they're kinda fun."

"Fascinating. You're really quite skilled at this."

"I just think they're pretty to look at, y'know? Instruments and models from the olden days."

He looked up at me and gave a wide, confident grin—or at least, I assumed as much. Thanks to the deep forest of whiskers concealing his mouth, all I actually perceived was a slight twitching of his cheeks.

Perhaps, I reflected, his motive for growing out his beard was tied to some latent urge to flee deep into a forest and remain hidden there for the rest of his days. Or perhaps it was a biological signal—a warning to predators to stay away, lest they bear the wrath of his painful quills. Quite honestly, any cute,

soft-skinned girl would be reduced to a bloody pulp if she ever attempted to nuzzle her cheek against his. Perhaps this was why there had never been any nuzzling of cheeks in Takayabu's life, kindhearted man that he was. With each passing day, the beard grew only denser and the likelihood of nuzzling more remote. And for that, I considered Takayabu a deeply respectable man.

At the co-op cafeteria, I've occasionally witnessed stacks of flyers set out by the trendy, popular university clubs devoted to organizing social functions. They advertise parties with coeds from other universities, summertime beach bashes, winter ski getaways, and other beguiling events. I have heard that, every year, five to six students perish from the exertion of attending all the festivities.

I've yet to witness any of these events in person, so I suppose it is possible that they and their organizing bodies are entirely fictional. However, for Shikama and me, the sight of the advertisements alone is sufficient to incite rage.

At one point, we determined to form our own, decidedly untrendy club and plan our own social functions. We called the club Man Musk and threw our doors open wide. Anyone was welcome to attend. Even women. Especially women. Unfortunately, no female students responded to our advertisements. They walked right by our welcoming arms without a glance in our direction.

Undeterred, we held our first event, a jam-packed, ten-man hot pot party that took place in August. It very nearly resulted in fatalities of our own, and the club was promptly disbanded.

Our intent was to inflict self-torture. The hot pot party was supposed to push us to our limits and, in doing so, cultivate a strong psyche capable of enduring any future hardship. In the end, the self-torture was a little too intense. In the environment we'd created, even a kimchi hot pot proved overwhelming, nearly sending a few of us straight up to heaven. In the end, we learned a hard truth: Hot pot parties are an activity best reserved for winter.

Though the club was done for, my compatriots and I had decided to attempt a private comeback. The return hot pot party was to be hosted in my lodgings, and oyster was to be the main ingredient.

There were some early setbacks as we prepped the other typical standbys. Shikama inexplicably began to viciously deride napa cabbage, listing off all the

vegetable’s shortcomings. Ido appeared to lose himself in erotic fantasy while slicing strips of tenderloin, and it was only with great difficulty that we pulled him away and out of his torpor. But aside from those small hurdles, the hot pot party commenced smoothly, and we reconfirmed that, in the correct season, the hot pot is a magnanimous thing that warmly envelops the souls of all who gather near.

Takayabu, having a great tolerance for alcohol, had brought his own bottle of liquor, and as he threw back each successive glass, a mysterious smile spread behind his iron sand whiskers. I had no idea what about the atmosphere was so amusing to him. The rest of us took small, careful sips of warmed sake like cats lapping from platters of milk.

“So tell us,” Takayabu suddenly bellowed, turning to me. “Did you find anything over there in London?”

He was dredging up an episode from my past. In the spring of my fourth year, in tandem with my flight from responsibilities at the Faculty of Agriculture, I’d fled from Japan as well, spending approximately a month gallivanting through London. Takayabu and Shikama had since made many a jest about my “journey of self-discovery.”

Takayabu was of the opinion that anything requiring a journey of discovery isn’t really worth being found. And I supposed that was probably true for a man with so large a presence he had nary a hope of making his way through life in any covert manner. Still, I would prefer not to be lumped in with the many hopeless, wayward youths out there who believe they’ve grown in some significant way merely by taking a brief trip overseas.

“I most certainly did,” I replied defiantly.

“Huh?” Takayabu’s surprise was evident. “What did you find?”

“My self.”

“Where?”

“It was on display among the exhibits at the British Museum.”

Shikama, mouth half occupied slurping down a clump of Malony noodles, chimed in earnestly, “All the way over in London and behind glass, hmm? I can see why it would be difficult to find.”

“Describe it,” Takayabu demanded. “What does a self look like when you find it?”

“Why, it was encased in a tin container about yea big. It even had a charming little ribbon wrapped around it. It made for a very moving sight.”
Ido grinned. “How inspiring!”
Takayabu let out a deep sigh. “If what you’re saying is true, then that means my self is somewhere out there waiting to be found, too.”
“Most likely. But I’d recommend you begin *your* search on the surface of the moon.”

Just as the party was really picking up, we heard a hiss outside, like hard wind assaulting the windowpanes. It was followed by a rapid drumming. We’d been hit by a heavy rainstorm.
There was a great rumbling in the distance, and Shikama’s voice grew meek.
“Thunder,” he whispered.
This, I should note, was coming from a man known to react to thunderstorms by crawling on his hands and knees down Imadegawa Street to, quote, “reduce the likelihood of my being struck by lightning.”
Ido craned his neck, listening intently. After a moment, he announced, “Don’t worry. It sounds pretty distant.”
“Cover your navel!” Shikama shrieked. “Raijin will aim right for it if you give him the chance!”
Then, after thinking for a moment, he added, “Well, not that it matters. What good is a navel, anyway?”
“You know, there’s something I’ve always wondered,” I began, laying bare my ignorance. “How exactly is a lightning rod supposed to keep a building safe? It always seemed to me that sticking up toward the sky like that would only draw *more* lightning.”
Takayabu groaned. “You’re a science major, and you don’t have any idea how a lightning rod works?”
Then, quickly returning to a bushy grin, he began to explain.
“An electric charge builds up inside a thundercloud, see? It grows and grows until it desperately needs somewhere to go, and then *bam*, lightning! It finds the path of least resistance through the air and comes crackling down to the ground. That’s all there is to it.

“So the answer is to not let a charge build up to the point that lightning becomes inevitable. If we provide a way for it to escape to the ground bit by bit, it’ll never reach a critical mass. Enter the lightning rod. It’s an artificial pathway for an electric charge to reach the ground.

“Speaking of which, in olden times, lightning was seen as a form of divine retribution. So for a period of time even after the invention of the lightning rod, churches refused to install the things. They figured there wasn’t any need, since God would never unleash His wrath onto the righteous.

“But given that all the other buildings in towns were starting to install the rods, and the fact that churches tend to be relatively tall structures, pretty soon it was the unprotected churches that were attracting all the lighting strikes!

“In fact, this one church in Italy had been used to store gunpowder. When lightning inevitably hit the structure, half the town got blown away. Ha-ha-ha!”

Ido interjected, mumbling, “So if we think of men as lightning, then the lightning rod that keeps us from accosting random women on the street is…the video shop.”

“I really wish you’d get your mind out of the gutter,” Takayabu chided quietly. “I don’t care how good the analogy is. You need to stop thinking of everything in terms of sex.”

Shikama, surprisingly, jumped in to defend Ido’s line of thought. “What’s so wrong about focusing on sex? Hmm?”

“It starts to reflect on you. If a guy’s always making seedy comments, he develops an aura about himself. Take you, for example.”

Shikama spread his arms wide and peered down from his chest to his feet.

“By the gods, you’re right. What *is* this awful shine?” He trembled as he spoke.

“It’s the musk of man, you dolt,” said Takayabu, pouring another drink into his cup. “Your parents would be ashamed of you.”

Allow me now to write of Kouhei Ido.

Though Shikama and Takayabu each had idiosyncratic pursuits I could never hope to keep pace with, Ido was on another level entirely. No matter the time or place, the man was always busy digging pits of despair to cast himself into. Shikama, Takayabu, and I observed the endless loop of Ido’s existence with

morbid curiosity and perhaps a slight sense of inadequacy. Ido proved that the grudges we held with the world were in fact a trifle of what could be.

Ido trod a thorny path of mental equilibrium, the brambles snagging on every part of him, drawing blood from his soul, tears from his eyes, sweat from his skin, and numerous other cryptic secretions from who knew where. All the while, he wailed in endless agony. We presumed him liable to a total breakdown at any moment yet perceived in him a steel resolve—a refusal to be defeated. Ido forever toed the line, and for that we had to tip our hats to him.

Typically, he spoke very little, silently nursing his ruthless grudge against the world. Occasionally, the hatred boiled over. Ido would erupt in a geyser of dreadful rage, soon to be doused by a storm of self-hate. He'd berate himself for the outburst and sink into a bog of misery even deeper than the last, where hatred for the world would again pool until sufficient to propel the cycle once more. Ido's was a deep, scalding, awe-inspiring rancor. It was a weapon that even we, his three companions, would hesitate to wield.

To me, it seemed a nightmarish existence. Ido lived like a monk, an ascetic devoted to the art of anger. Even Shikama couldn't help but encourage the man to take an occasional break. (Mind, this was the same leader of ours who had declared to Takayabu that he'd waste no effort attempting to rouse a man from his sorrows. Shikama was loath to admit it, but he did harbor compassion for his brothers-in-arms.)

If Ido was able to take a break, I've no doubt he would have. But it was his inability to do so that made him who he was.

I'll never forget his covert maneuverings during my spat with Ebizuka. They were dirty and cowardly, and I found them to be very commendable. However, I have my scruples about recording them in any detail here. When I discovered what he was doing, I made no attempt to admonish his actions or to stop him—a decision that I also regard as quite cowardly, commendable, and unnecessary for me to expound upon.

Of all the people in all the world, Shikama, Takayabu, and I alone escaped Ido's net of hatred. At least, we hoped that to be the case. We were all that Ido had. We were his only source of reprieve. If he did hate us, he risked total isolation.

That is to say, with the sole exception of our small band of brothers, Ido harbored a fateful indignation toward every human being that crawled the

surface of the earth. He wished with every fiber of his being that all other souls were doomed to wallow in perpetual misfortune.
He once explained his stance to me by saying, “If everyone else is unhappy, then I’ll be happy by comparison.”
And I had to admit, there was a certain logic to that. Ido may have been stuck in a bog of worldly jealousy for time eternal, but his self-torture had led him to at least one enlightened truth.

Takayabu’s criticism seemed to hit home, and Ido ultimately ended up sitting in a corner of my four-and-a-half-mat room, knees bunched up under his chin as he quietly berated himself. A thick curtain of gloom descended from the ceiling to cordon off his corner and swallow him up. He seemed to be thinking, *I can’t believe I brought up sex again. I’m deplorable. I’m the worst.*
Takayabu broke the silence with a peculiar and unprompted observation.
“Objects placed in high locations possess a great deal of potential energy,” he announced. “When such objects fall, their potential energy transforms into kinetic energy.”
Shikama shot him a quizzical look as he picked at the remains of the hot pot. “What are you getting at?”
“Think about it. People have their highs and lows, too. If a euphoric mental state signifies potential energy, then it stands to reason that the energy is expelled outward when disappointment strikes. I mean, the energy has to go *somewhere*, right? And if we could just find a way to harness it…”
We began to fantasize about this immense resource that could be used to save the whole of humankind. All we needed to do was figure out how to convert failure, heartbreak, and fatal disease into usable energy. The sufferings that beset humanity would power every automobile and aeroplane in the world. We’d have limitless internet bandwidth; we’d be able to watch videos of idol groups day in and day out. There could be no greater future.
And it would turn individuals like Ido, stuck in their endless vortexes of anguish, into the saviors of humanity. The obnoxiously positive people who are the darlings of the world today would be chucked right in the garbage, and it would be Ido’s time to shine.

Ido poked his head out from the gloomy marshland he'd terraformed in the corner of my four-and-a-half-mat room.

"If I had access to an energy source like that," he said, "the first thing I'd do is focus it into a beam to fry all the couples sitting along the Kamo River."

The rest of us nodded in unison.

The flocks of evenly spaced cuddlers along the Kamo were a well-known social phenomenon. This ubiquitous behavior had come to be known as the Kamo River Law of Even Spacing. Even now, the couples and their arrangement present a particularly noisome problem to any lonely student who happens to wander onto the banks around sunset. So far, none of the great minds tackling it have been able to produce a solution.

We ourselves had taken to forcibly and frequently elbowing our way between the happy-looking pairs, such that the bank was then arranged man-woman, man-woman, man-woman, man-woman, *man-man-man-man*, man-woman, man-woman, man-woman, man-woman. This disturbance of the regular arrangement was our attempt to arouse regret and embarrassment in others present, but the standard pairs were all so busy gazing at the epidermis on each other's faces—which was hardly that attractive, mind you—that they failed to even notice our piddling struggle. In the end, we were the ones most subjected to pain and embarrassment by our endeavor.

Even so, another two or three months down the line, our green-eyed monsters would thrash once more in our breasts, spoiling for a fight. We'd ignore the heavy casualties of our previous campaign and embark on a new raid to thwart the Law, using precisely the same tactics as before.

Takayabu cut in again, unable to leave us to our fantasy.

"If we did find a way to extract the energy from the depressed masses," he said, "they'd rocket to new importance in society. The future of humanity would rest on their shoulders. And once they realized that, they'd probably start thinking themselves pretty special. They'd decide they can't go around looking depressed anymore. Pretty soon, *they'd* be the obnoxiously positive people all the rest of us have to deal with."

"And if that happens… Poof! There goes our newfound resource."

"Hmm. Yes. Quite the dilemma."

I noticed that the hot pot was nearly picked clean, so I quickly emptied another package of noodles inside. As we waited for the broth to boil again, we grew relatively quiet. Ido disappeared back behind his curtain of depression. Shikama stared as the noodles slowly softened and untangled, his mind clearly filled with the disturbing, the indecent, and varied other categories of thoughts. Takayabu was still pouring cup after cup of liquor into his bottomless digestive pit, a permanent smile buried beneath his steel whiskers. I lit a cigarette.

The rain continued to drum, accented by the occasional whoosh of a car on its way up or down Yamanaka Pass. I looked up at my clock. The hands had already nudged past midnight.

“Can I bum a smoke?” Ido said, his hand extending almost apologetically from one corner of the invisible curtain. I placed a cigarette into Ido’s open palm, and it withdrew to apologetically insert the filter into his mouth and apologetically light the tip. He returned to staring at the walls of his dark corner, letting out the occasional, apologetic puff of smoke.

“What are we even talking about?” Takayabu asked.

“I’ve got a better question. What have we been talking about for the past five years?”

“This is how it’s always been,” I mumbled.

We could have jumped back to any point over the past half decade and found ourselves sitting exactly as we were now, having the same kinds of discussions. We were a stick of *Kintarou-ame* candy—always the same no matter where you slice it.

“Yeah. How come we never talk about anything constructive? What’s with this massive waste of our talents? It almost makes me feel bad.”

“That’s just the nature of the war we’re fighting,” Shikama replied.

“What’s the war even about?” Takayabu asked, the rim of his sake cup against his lip.

Shikama continued to stare into the hot pot. A slight, ineffable smile spread across his face.

“I’ve no idea.”

The four of us sat in pensive silence, ears tuned to the drumming rain.

After a time, Shikama rose to his feet, and before I knew it, he'd launched into an impassioned address right there on the tatami.

"My brothers!" he bellowed. "A most troubling thing occurred the other day at Mototanaka.

"Our peaceful corner shop was invaded in broad daylight. The shelves have been packed with Christmas cakes, and it is the poor, diligent student who now must suffer. He lives his life chaste and true, only to be taunted by the sight of those cakes, reminded daily of the fact that he has no reason to buy one, as there's no special someone in his life with whom to spend an intimate holiday.

"Are we to allow this tyranny to go unaddressed? No! I say to you today, we will no longer stand by and allow the demon of Christmas to rampage through our fair city!

"We have been more than generous. We look past the absurdity of this foreign holiday's observance in our nation. If dreams of sugarplums and visits from an enigmatic, white-bearded coot of Celtic legend are to be pushed upon our children, so be it. It is distasteful, but so are all forms of worldly greed.

"But we can no longer abide the season's evil syncretism and systematic glorification of romance. Do the proponents of Christmas not perceive the subtle violence of their ways? Their sonorous rejoicing deepens the harsh cold of the Kyoto winter. They champion a shameless, pointless uproar that only sows seeds of meaningless anguish among countless members of our populace.

"Our brethren have endured too long in silence. No longer will they live under a banner of Russian fatalism against the steady advance of Christmas fascism. No longer shall they spend their winter days shackled, unable to walk the streets of Kyoto in comfort until the birth of Christ has passed. It is time for the people of Japan to step back and reclaim a sense of modesty.

"Let them hear our cries! We owe them no debt! No favors! Their anthems to faux happiness are an offense to our ears. We needn't huddle gloomily around the hot pot any longer, barricaded inside, consumed by bitter and illogical feelings of inferiority and alienation. We needn't drown in agony and embarrassment for not living a 'normal' student life or for lacking a girlfriend with whom to spend Christmas each year.

"The proponents of Christmas flaunt pictures of the cuddling couples of this world and claim we, too, will find happiness if we just follow their lead. They

preach that it is a student's *duty* to pair with a member of the opposite sex for the season.

"Cover your ears! Demand their silence! A student's only duty is to the pursuit of knowledge. If he has time enough for infatuation, that's time he should be devoting to scholarly pursuits. He should buckle down and study, god dammit!" Shikama paused for a moment, panting heavily.

"My apologies," he said once he'd caught his breath. "I got a little carried away.

"Anyway. Every day, we are surrounded by the deafening chorus of Christmas. It makes presumptuous, outrageous offers to show us the way to true happiness. We never asked for such lessons, and we do not need them. I cry out: My happiness is mine alone! But my voice—nay, *our* voices are drowned out by the deafening chant.

"*That* is the offense we shall no longer tolerate. If our adversaries are so hell-bent on ruffling our tranquility, then we shall strike back in kind. It's clear enough that our society thinks Christmas Eve a very precious time. I know not why they hold it so dear nor why Christmas Day is of so little import in comparison. In my mind, if the eve of a holiday is fit for observance, then they should be celebrating Christmas Eve Eve as well. It's absurd! Illogical!

"But the fact remains that Christmas Eve is their treasure. It is the peak of the season's frenzy, when young couples dash across the archipelago in search of festive light displays, strangle countless innocent birds to sate their voracious appetites, fill all vacancies at the love hotels, and expend exorbitant amounts of energy on useless fantasies that propel our world that much faster toward ecological collapse. It is a nightmare of a day, and it is our ideal opportunity to act.

"This year, we'll make a mess of their special moment. We'll force their eyes open to the fatuity of their beliefs and shake them to their core. This Christmas Eve, there will be chaos, and Shijo Kawaramachi will be its epicenter. We four will return Kyoto to its tumultuous days of yore! The whole city will once again feel the unbridled fury of the Eejanaika Uprising!"

The rest of us burst into applause. We cheered for our fearless leader. And in the back of our minds, we all wondered, *What on earth is the Eejanaika Uprising?*

At the early hour of seven, I headed out to the convenience store to pick up a few necessities. On the way back to my lodgings, plastic bag dangling from one arm, feet trudging up the slope, I pondered the events of the previous night.

My three compatriots were still in the room, along with all their oppressive intensity. I knew the festering musk of man must hang heavy beyond my door. Did I really want to return to that awful atmosphere after breathing the crisp morning air? The prospect weighed on my heart.

I am well aware that I, too, exude a similar odor. But the fact remains that the musk of another is not one's own.

For a moment, I was seized with the impulse to flee. I'd run up Mount Daimonji and continue all the way down the other side until I hit Lake Biwa. But in the end, I reconsidered. I'd kick the three of them out so I could catch a nap. I headed back through the entrance of my building fully intending to follow through.

Hazy morning light filled the hallway. I opened the door to my room, and a thick male odor oozed out, more pungent than I'd imagined. It seemed to manifest physically. I could feel long, slimy filaments clinging to me from head to toe.

The blinds were drawn and the interior dim. My nose picked out another strange scent, and I recalled that Takayabu had been "cooking" squid snacks with his lighter again.

On the tatami, I saw my three compatriots lying like prisoners in a tiny cell, their sleeping faces painful to behold. Their limbs and belongings were splayed such that I had difficulty plotting a safe route to the far side of the room.

Ultimately, I cut my way boldly across, caring not whether I disturbed the heap of corpses. I opened the blinds. Light poured in, restoring a moderately healthy ambience to the room. I'd left the door ajar and now threw open the window, too. A rush of fresh morning air whipped through the stagnant interior. Shikama groaned in protest.

"Good gods, it's cold."

He was right. But my response was colder yet.

"Time to get up."

I pulled the lid from my electric kettle and filled it from the sink.

“Good morning,” Ido answered apologetically, rising from sleep just enough to kneel in *seiza* on the floor.
“Is Takayabu awake yet?”
“Are you kidding?” Shikama replied, voice still heavy with sleep. “You’ll have to do a lot better than that to rouse the slumbering giant.”
I looked over at Takayabu. In the course of a single night, his beard had doubled in volume. Asleep, the man had the appearance of… I wasn’t even sure how to put it. He was bushier than ever. Beyond unkempt. A night on the floor had turned him into something out of the Cthulhu mythos. His massive, shaggy nostrils were swirling vortexes aimed at the heavens. I worried that even a peek into the abyss would be enough to suck me in.
After a moment’s thought, I pulled out a packet of cotton swabs from my recent shopping excursion. I took one swab from the packet and gently lowered it into the void.
Takayabu coughed and sputtered. My nasal expedition was a rousing success.
“Geez. It’s morning?” asked Takayabu.
“More like afternoon,” I replied.
“It’s morning already?” he repeated drowsily.
In the time it took Takayabu to respond to my most pleasant wake-up call, Shikama and Ido had begun crawling about, gathering up their belongings. Shikama was now busy washing the hot pot in the sink—it had come from his apartment to accommodate the previous night’s party.
“I can’t stand morning sluggishness,” he said. “I should have headed home before sunup like I’d intended. It just feels so…pitiful to wake up together after a night of drinking. Why is that?”
“It’s not just after a night of drinking,” I mumbled, pulling back the lid of a foam cup of ramen noodles. “Our whole lives are pitiful.”
Ido groaned. “My whole *body* aches. Everything from my tailbone to my pubis!” His joints audibly popped and cracked as he moved.
I supposed he had a point. Lying on a cramped tatami floor with nothing but a draped jacket to keep warm was bound to leave one feeling stiff in the morning. Still, I highly doubted there was any reason for his pubis to ache.
Takayabu eyed my hands blearily. “Oh, man, that looks so good… Why didn’t you get me one?”

I ignored him, poured the now-boiling water into my cup, and replaced the lid.
“Agh, the inside of my ear won’t stop itching,” I said, scratching the canal with one of the cotton swabs.
“Please promise you’ll never wake me up like that again. It was the *worst*,” whined Takayabu.
“If it works, it works,” I replied. “Are you heading to your lab today?”
“Nah, forget that. I’m going back to my apartment to sleep.”
A great lion’s yawn escaped his maw.
I turned to Ido. “What about you?”
“I’m going home, too. I can’t stand being at my lab.”
The statement was simultaneously polite and dismissive. From what I’d gathered, Ido’s research projects were not going well, and he didn’t get along with his professor, so he’d all but stopped showing up.
Takayabu perked up, suddenly alert. “Oh, hey! It’s time for *Kamen Rider*!”
He switched on the TV.

It was the final days of the shogun, during the short-lived Keio Era. In Shimonoseki, Shinsaku Takasugi’s days as a revolutionary were over. He was enduring a slow, painful death by consumption as he murmured his famous verse about killing all the crows in the universe in order to enjoy a long, leisurely sleep to midmorning—a sentiment I wholly endorse. In Kyoto, the Shinsengumi were strutting down Shijo Street, and Ryoma Sakamoto was restlessly wandering the back alleys, his clothes tattered, one hand clutching a Chinese translation of Wheaton’s *Elements of International Law*. The nation was days away from learning that the shogun intended to cede his authority to the emperor in a desperate attempt to secure his own future. Wherever one went, people were dropping fat stacks of cash, freshly severed heads, and sixteen-year-old beauties. The Eejanaika Uprising was just getting underway.
The movement spread out gradually from Kyoto, its adherents endlessly proclaiming “*Eejanaika*,” which roughly equates to a flippant “Why the hell not?”
Eejanaika! Eejanaika! Slap some paper over that slit!
Eejanaika! Eejanaika! If it rips, give it a little spit!
Eejanaika! Eejanaika!

They beat their *taiko* drums, danced in ecstasy, and paraded all over town in absolute mayhem. It was exhilarating. You couldn't begin to wrap your head around it. Whenever the ecstatic dancers happened across a lavish manor, they barged their way in, bounced off the walls, and dangled from the chandeliers. Every fine object they laid eyes on, they shouted to the owner, "How 'bout it? Can I have it? *Eejanaika! Eejanaika!*" And the owner had no choice but to respond, "Sure! Take it! *Eejanaika! Eejanaika!*" Once the crowd had pilfered everything it could carry, it headed off down the street to the next wealthy home.

Can you imagine anything more electrifying?

There's a fair bit of history preceding the uprising, and multiple theories exist about how exactly it grew so large. It might have involved anti-shogun elements conspiring to foment unrest behind the scenes. It might have linked back to the tradition of unsanctioned mass pilgrimages to the Ise Grand Shrine. But I'm afraid that any further details are a bit beyond my grasp. You are most welcome to read up on the subject yourselves, dear readers. If you do, I'd recommend first locating a trustworthy academic tome.

But no matter how closely you scrutinize the pages of that solid volume, poring over every word from top to bottom, you will not find the slightest suggestion that the Eejanaika Uprising was instigated by disillusioned youth fed up with the worldly obsessions of Christmastime couples.

Where in the hell had Shikama stumbled upon Eejanaika, and why was he lifting it as the banner for us to rally under now?

Frankly, certain elements of the analogy aroused concern—namely, the talk of frenzied masses dancing their way into the homes of the wealthy to pillage their belongings. Shikama wasn't hoping to use whatever turmoil we stirred up for his own nefarious ends, was he? I pictured him slinking up behind some terrified couple on Shijo Street, grabbing the girl and lifting her above his head, proclaiming "How 'bout it? Can I have her? *Eejanaika! Eejanaika!*" and darting off into the night with his prize.

I desperately wanted to believe that if there was anyone in the world above that kind of behavior, it was Shikama. At the same time, I feared that my friend might be the only person in the world capable of devising such a plan.

Shikama, I prayed, I'm begging you: Please remain a gentleman!

I was in my third year of college when Mizuo enrolled as a member of our club and my relationship with Ebizuka grew especially strained. The details of our dispute are rather asinine, and I've no intent to relay them here. Believe me. It is not an amusing tale.

At the time, worldly desire had robbed me of all capacity for rational thought. I'd abandoned my studies and all other constructive activities in favor of the ongoing scheme to secure Mizuo's affections. Shikama was spurring me on, and Ido was assisting from the shadows, fueled by a particularly fervent loathing of Ebizuka. Looking back, I must admit that as potent as they were in undermining the competition, Ido's machinations really were quite unsettling.

In any case, Ebizuka was ultimately forced to withdraw from the running.

Being a year ahead of me, he was also nearing graduation. His time in the club was coming to an end, and that winter, we arranged a farewell party. Ebizuka arrived clad in antiquated Japanese-style clothing, tantamount to cosplay of Ryoma Sakamoto. I've no idea what the man was trying to prove.

The after-party was held at a cozy little restaurant in Kiyamachi with traditional decor. Sliding paper shutters concealed the windows, beyond which could be heard the gentle babbling of the Takase River.

The evening's menu was hot pot. Ebizuka and I happened to be seated opposite one another, thus sharing a pot. That evening, he pointedly refrained from forcing any drinks upon me, which, if anything, I found more unsettling than his typical behavior. He did, however, stare at me all throughout the meal, eyes sharp and gleaming.

"Where's your appetite?" he urged at one point. "Come on. Eat up!"

I was anxious for the meal to end. I poked at the contents of the hot pot restlessly, unwisely consuming several oysters that had yet to be thoroughly cooked.

Eventually, Ebizuka grew inebriated, and out came the decorative sword. Even knowing it wasn't a functional blade, I still found it oddly terrifying. It possessed a strange intensity in Ebizuka's hands. He said nothing, only weaving and twisting the weapon through the air this way and that. The blade glinted each time it caught the light overhead.

Suddenly, he was up on his feet. I flinched, fearing I was about to be cut down. Instead, Ebizuka turned, threw open the shutters, and climbed over the windowsill and out into the cold. Everyone in attendance sat frozen in shock.

After a moment, there was a great splashing sound, and we rushed to the windows to find Ebizuka kicking and flailing about in the Takase.

"Come at me!" he shouted. The blade flashed once under the Kiyamachi streetlights as Ebizuka lunged at some unseen foe or object. Then he dashed off into the night and was gone.

That was the last I saw of Ebizuka.

According to other acquaintances in the club, he never returned—not even to pay his share of the dinner bill.

My eyes opened to a long, slow scratching noise.

I checked the clock. Two in the morning.

The scratching came again, and I sat up in bed. It sounded like claws slowly raking their way up and down my thin wooden door. There was a great *thud*, and I heard my door rattle from the impact. I leaped to my feet. I was still standing among the folds of my futon when the next *thud* reverberated throughout my lodgings. *Thud. Thud.* Someone was slamming their fist against my door, trying to break it down. I had little faith in the flimsy wooden construction. Surely it wouldn't hold up to much punishment. Scarcely had the worry entered my mind when the door *did* break—a thick, burly arm punched a hole right through and was jutting into my room. Despite the season, his shirtsleeve was rolled up past the elbow, exposing a thick, shaggy coat of hair on his forearm. It was the muscled, revolting arm of a man among men.

"I *know* you're in there!"

The ferocious yell quaked its way through the pit of my stomach.

Ebizuka had returned.

"Um…! No need to get angry," I cried. "Whatever this is about, I'm sure I can explain!"

"Oh, I already know everything. That's why I'm here. I've come to *kill* you."

"Um! Uh! You really shouldn't say things like that! It could be construed as a threat. You might get arrested!"

The arm, now jammed up to its socket, lunged in my direction.

“Just when I thought I was finally going to be happy,” he growled, “you had to come along and mess it all up. Bet you thought it was real funny, huh? You get the girl while I’m left out in the cold. You bastard. You should be ashamed to call yourself a man!”
“Now, now, I think that’s taking things a bit—”
“All I wanted was an ordinary, happy life! How *dare* you come along and screw it up?!”
“Don’t you think that’s a bit of an exaggeration?”
My body felt sluggish and uncooperative. I tried to inch toward the far wall, curling up to make myself as small as possible.
“You ruined my life! Everything that’s happened since is your fault. All of it! Oh, am I gonna enjoy tearing you apart, limb by limb.”
Ebizuka roared, tears in his voice, and began slamming against the door with even more intensity. The flimsy slab of wood creaked and groaned. It began to splinter, and then it gave way entirely. Ebizuka broke through, a horrific mix of man and some terrible new entity.
That was when I woke up.

I sat for a while in my sweat-drenched nightclothes, shivering and disconcerted. When I finally found the strength to stand, I ran a towel under the sink and used it to rub myself down, then changed and returned to the safety of my futon. I pulled the blankets tight around me and began reading Natsume Soseki to calm my nerves.
My choice of text, unfortunately, had the opposite effect. The passages of *Light and Darkness* left me feeling more suffocated yet, until I found it difficult even to draw breath. I tossed Soseki aside, just in time to coincide with the distant, tinny blare of an unfamiliar horn. I tilted my ear to the window.
I’d heard that sound before. It always came late on winter nights when the frigid air outside my futon threatened to turn my toes to ice. It was the strange jingle of a ramen cart. A few times, I’d hurried out into the cold after it. My chase was always in vain. I was never fast enough to catch it, and believe me, dear readers, it is a terribly hollow feeling to be outrun by a ramen cart.
Each time, as I trudged back home under the stars, I recalled a story my father once shared about a cart that went by the name of Cat Ramen. Thirty years

ago, at the height of an era of student protests and campus strife, my father had spent his college days in a neighborhood not far from my current one. He claimed to have eaten a meal at Cat Ramen once. When I first heard the tale, I assumed my father was talking about a normal ramen cart with a slightly eccentric name. But he insisted that the broth used for the ramen was made from actual cats. He claimed that, as he ate the meal, cat bones were clearly visible swirling around in the cart's large, bubbling pot.

My father had always enjoyed pulling my leg about every subject imaginable, so I knew better than to take him at his word. Still, he adamantly claimed that Cat Ramen had served one of the best meals he'd ever eaten.

I'd come to believe that maybe, just maybe, the unseen cart that kept passing beyond my fingertips was the fabled Cat Ramen. Whenever the jingle pricked my ears, I found it difficult to suppress a surge of hope.

Thus it was this time, too. I was hesitant to leave the safety of my warm futon, knowing the awful chill that waited outside. Nevertheless, my curiosity won out. I gritted my teeth, changed clothes once again, threw a coat over my shoulders, and dashed out into the Kitashirakawa night.

In the end, I failed. I managed a brief glimpse of the mysterious cart in the distance, vanishing into the suburban darkness. Cat Ramen had slipped by once again.

Oh, how I wished to taste the ramen my father had spoken of.

Thoughts of my father and mother suddenly welled up in my breast. Given my greatness, I typically feel no need to defer to others. But there are a select few to whom I am forever indebted: namely, my father, my mother, and the global ecology. To these three, I owe respect.

One might even say that my bitter fight through this mortal existence, each day a valuable step toward realizing my lofty ideals, is my way of repaying that debt to my parents. My valiant struggle is a tribute to them, a way to show appreciation for my father's generosity, which towers among the highest peaks, and my mother's, which runs deeper than the sea.

At the present time, the fruits of my labors have proven wholly inadequate to quell their sense of worry and dismay. Whenever my mind touches upon that fact, my resolve admittedly wavers. My chest ever so gradually deflates, and

my shoulders begin to slump. It is an alarming divergence from my usual confidence—and one that leaves me concerned for my own future.

Truth be told, I hadn't been in contact with my family for some time. I wondered how my parents were doing.

In May of my fourth year at college, when I fled my duties at the research lab in the Faculty of Agriculture, I returned to live with them for a short time. Eventually, I was obliged to return to Kyoto to take care of assorted irksome odds and ends. On the day of my departure, my father handed me a letter.

I did not open it until I was aboard the train to Kyoto. The content was presented in a very fatherly manner, well reasoned and logically compelling. He wrote of the major decisions that shape our lives and of the many things we should take into account as we make those decisions. I was already grappling with a sense of uncertainty that I did not fully understand. My father's well-argued advice only compounded my indecision.

The letter concluded with, To my son, my greatest pride and joy.

I puffed up with a great sense of importance. Why shouldn't my father rejoice? Any man would be thrilled to have a son as great as I am. But even as I thought that, I felt more uncertain than ever about the path that lay before me.

As I walked the nighttime street, mulling this over, I fell victim to the sort of youthful anguish entirely unbefitting a man of my station. Distress gnawed at my heart. I attempted to distract myself with some manner of cheerful fantasy, but I found it difficult to concentrate.

At some point, I began to fear that the evil eye was trained upon me. It was threatening to throw my mental homeostasis into disarray, crush my solemn dignity, and drag me from the heavens of lofty contemplation back to earth. This *had* to be the work of the eye. Where was it lurking? What could I do to finally free myself of its influence?

I clutched at my breast, trying to calm my nervous soul. I shuffled through the dark neighborhoods restlessly, already near the outskirts of Tanaka Haruna.

A high-pitched metallic whine shattered the nighttime air. I perked up, tilting an ear in an attempt to identify the source. A dotted trail of streetlights revealed the way ahead, but I saw nothing among their soft white platters of light able to generate such a noise. In fact, I saw nothing at all that would

disturb the still of night. I was alone on an expanse of frigid asphalt, the remnants of each breath I exhaled extending up and away like steam from a locomotive's chimney.

Then, at a crossroads in the distance, I spotted it. The Eizan. It entered the intersection from the left and headed away to my right, its windows glittering in the dark.

I bolted forward, running with every bit of strength I had. I skidded to the right at the crossroads, then turned down alleyway after alleyway, pursuing the train by sound. Several times, the screech of the wheels grew close only to fall away again. I envisioned myself as one giant ear, sensitive to the tiniest noise, as I desperately sought the Eizan among the network of narrow streets. I sped down one lane, turned onto another, twisted and wove my way through the neighborhood until I realized I was at the condemned building from the other day. This was the site of my humiliating second encounter with Endou, when I'd been obliged to deliver lunch to him and his crew.

A harsh, drawn-out screech and a hiss echoed from the courtyard on the opposite side. Shortly afterward, there was silence. The train seemed to have come to a stop.

I peeked down the tiny alleyway at the side of the condemned building. There seemed to be a hazy, gently swaying light at the far end, but I couldn't be sure.

After checking my surroundings, ascertaining that I was alone and unseen, I began to creep down the alleyway. It was still littered with junk and all the more difficult to traverse in the dark.

After what seemed like an eternity spent carefully feeling my way forward, I emerged into the courtyard, where I discovered an old, canopied station building.

A shrill bell rang, announcing the train's imminent departure. The sound reverberated across the station's domed ceiling, and I sprinted, barreling through a polished wooden ticket gate and down the length of a timeworn brick wall.

The boarding platform was empty. There were no station attendants or other passengers in sight. But the old, two-car Eizan sat waiting, doors ajar, and I threw myself inside.

The doors slid shut with a hiss, and the bell ceased to ring, its final echo trapped, ever wandering, in the station's canopy. And then, the Eizan began to roll forward.

I let out a sigh, settling down into one of the soft bench seats.

The train made its way through sleeping Kyoto. In the dark, the windows were mirrors. My own face stared back at me, illuminated by the carriage lights. Only when I pressed up close to the glass could I faintly make out the city's packed rows of houses, highlighted by the occasional lonely streetlight. I realized we were nearing Saginomori. The houses fell away in favor of aged stone walls so close I could have reached out and touched them. Treetops peeked up over the walls, their branches brushing against the carriage windows and generating a constant, gentle rustling as we made our way forward.

The walls abruptly ended, replaced by a lengthy canal. I realized that to anyone standing on the far bank, I would appear as she had to me. It occurred to me that Mizuo must be traveling on this very train each night, heading off somewhere as yet unknown.

Now the Eizan was snaking its way through the dense forest surrounding the Shugakuin Imperial Villa. For a time, I could make out nothing beyond the windows.

Then, without warning, night turned to day. The carriage's lamps flickered out, and sunlight rushed into the car. I felt warm, and I entrusted myself to the calming, regular *ka-clack* of the railway. I peered outside and found the train now surrounded by verdant green. We were speeding along between the thick, heavy trunks of a thicket awash with moist, fresh growth.

The train slowed and slid to a stop at a small, unattended station, whose platform was a lonely island of concrete among the trees. The doors lurched open, and all fell silent, as if frozen solid. I continued to sit on the bench for a moment, gazing at the gaping door. Finally, a distant birdcall roused me to my feet.

Light filtered through the leaves of the surrounding thicket, giving the concrete platform a mottled appearance that shifted ever so slightly with each passing breath of wind. The entire length of the platform was bare, save for a single

plastic bench. There were no advertisements for the local otolaryngologist or payday lender. There was no old timetable, its digits smeared from years spent under rain and sun. There wasn't even a smoking area or standing ashtray.

The final observation had me patting my pockets. I would have liked to stop for a quick smoke, but I'd left my cigarettes in my lodgings. I cursed the unfortunate oversight, then reconsidered. Perhaps it was for the best. She'd never been fond of the habit.

I descended from the platform and began to walk among the trees. Now that I was in motion, the air felt chill. I paused, and the gentle warmth of the sun seeped back into my skin. I resumed walking, and the chill wind again brushed playfully against my cheeks.

The trees were spaced well apart, such that I had no trouble passing through to the other end of the thicket. When I emerged, I found myself staring across a wide meadow, its perimeter lined with an uninterrupted ring of trees. I had the sense that I was standing on the edge of a vast, shallow dish filled to its brim with cool liquid.

I made my way down into the meadow, feeling as if I were wading through that unknown liquid. There was no sound aside from the crisp crunch of grass beneath my shoes. After a while, I began to whistle softly to myself.

In the center of the meadow, I spotted a familiar bookcase. It was a birthday gift I'd purchased for Mizuo; the two of us had lugged the thing from the furniture store all the way to her apartment. I'm sure it must have been a comical sight to passersby, the bookcase stretched out lengthwise between us as we cut down and across Higashioji Street.

I approached the bookcase, finding on the shelves a small yet respectable collection: Shugoro Yamamoto, Junichiro Tanizaki, and a copy of *The Tale of Genji*. I picked up the first volume of *Genji* and began to flip through its pages, then returned it to the shelf in bitter shame. I recalled the many times I'd felt a burst of inspiration to finally sit down and read the work in its entirety—all the way up through the ten quires of Uji—only to fizzle out well before the halfway mark.

I looked at my feet and was startled to find a *maneki-neko* on the ground—this one a high-tech, solar-powered model with an automatic waving arm. The sun's gentle rays caressed the cat, and it waved back happily at the world. Or

perhaps the enthusiastic motions of its paw were meant to mock me. I wasn't sure which. Maybe both, and the mockery was its source of enjoyment.
I sighed and turned away.
Rising above the sea of distant trees was the Tower of the Sun. As usual, it appeared a full size larger than I remembered. The Tower is eternally great. That's the only description it will ever need.
I reflected to myself that of course the Tower would be here. Of course she'd continued to revere it all this time. She was smitten with it. How could she not be?
I bowed my head and remained like that for a time, as if offering a silent prayer. I knew the implications. This was the conduct of one who knew he stood in the presence of something greater. It was the display of a man who knew it was time to admit defeat.

I headed away from the Tower, treading through the grass and then along a path lined with plane trees. Small canals flanked the path on either side, their waters sparkling in the sunlight. I was swept away by the fantastic beauty of my surroundings, and I wanted to spit on myself for that shameful capitulation to sentimentality. I longed for Mizuo to be with me to share this gorgeous view, and I consequently wished to spit on myself all the more. I spat and spat, sending specks of saliva flying in all directions until my throat was as dry as a husk.
A thought occurred, and I peered into the surrounding forest. What if she was nearby, slinking among the trees like a cat? My cursory search yielded no trace, but I resolved that if I did find her, I would warn her about Endou and his unusual habit of following her with a video camera in hand. I'd inform her that the man was bent on surreptitiously filming her in her most secretive moments—and that he'd now gone so far as to invade her dreams. And while I was at it, I'd point out that he was a fool, a nitwit, a coward, and a liar.
I continued along the path in the direction of the National Museum of Ethnology. When I reached the building, I found it dead silent. It seemed Mizuo was not here, either.

In fact, when I stepped inside, I found the vast museum entirely free from patrons and staff. The only sounds were the echoes of my shoes against the hard floors.

I walked the mazelike network of halls and exhibit rooms, gazing at the replica of the moai that had so excited me as a child and taking in the sculptures from all over Africa. I had never imagined I would have such an opportunity. Here I was, the entire museum to myself. For a brief time, I was elated, and all thoughts of Mizuo slipped from my mind.

I wandered, calm and relaxed, eventually finding myself alongside the great curved wall that lines the museum's brightly lit patio. The wall's construction—dozens of glass panes fitted into a supporting latticework—afforded a clear view of the whitish, Escherian space. The tops of the far three walls were painted black, as if to emphasize the perfect blue square of sky above. A large Aztec sculpture dominated the center of the courtyard. Next to it was a small white table with two chairs. In one sat Endou, busily scribbling away in his notebook, naught but a tiny presence in the vast courtyard.

The glass door leading out was half ajar. I ducked through and casually ambled into the open-air space. My steps interrupted the pervasive silence, and Endou looked up in surprise, hurriedly snapping his notebook shut.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I could ask you the same."

"You shouldn't be snooping around a place like this. It's not right."

"Again, I think that's *my* line."

I looked up and away, squinting at the bright-blue sky.

"So. What are you up to?" I asked.

"That's none of your business!"

A black bag lay open at his feet, exposing an assortment of filming equipment. Clearly, the reprobate was attempting to capture additional nonconsensual footage of Mizuo. I'd have thought he knew better by now. The man already deserved a slow, painful death on account of his stalking. Now he was doubling down on his crimes, taking his illicit photography to new depths.

I fumed. I was *this* close to tackling him. I imagined binding him up in ropes using the tortoiseshell pattern, after which I'd leave him to roll helplessly about the courtyard. However, I lack the knowledge to tie such knots.

After a moment, his defiant eyes faltered, and his shoulders slumped.
“I guess this means you found out about the station.”
“Quite by coincidence, really.”
I sat myself in the table’s other chair and inquired, “Where is she?”
“Beats me. But she has to be around here somewhere.”
I sensed he was telling the truth. He really didn’t know where to find her.
“Tell me,” I said, “how is it that you can stalk her so relentlessly, all the way into her dreams, yet you can’t muster the courage to tell her how you feel? It’s pathetic.”
“Leave me alone. I’ve got my own way of doing things.”
I felt the faintest stirrings of pity for him.
“Look,” I said. “I’ll stop with the insults. Just please, for your own sake, cut this out. The longer you spend scurrying about like a little mouse, the farther off the path you’ll stray.”
“Why should I take your advice? She dumped you!”
“Oh, and you’re a shining example of gallantry, are you?”
Endou swallowed visibly. “Fine. Point taken.”
He began rooting around in his bag and pulled out a small thermos. He opened it and poured some of that same delicious coffee from before into a cup, which he then proffered to me. I’d just been thinking that my throat felt a bit parched, so I accepted gratefully.
“Maybe you could clear something up for me,” he said. “There are tons of *maneki-neko* in this place. I see them everywhere. Do you know what that’s about?”
I sipped casually at my coffee, feigning ignorance. “No. I haven’t the slightest idea. She’s a woman of many mysteries, isn’t she?”
We both fell silent, and for a while, we sat with heads tilted back, absentmindedly staring at the sky. The season here seemed to be spring.
I’ve already written of how strange it felt to sit in Endou’s lodgings, engaged in relatively civil conversation. The absurdity of our present circumstances eclipsed that earlier encounter by an order of magnitude. Here we were inside Mizuo’s dreamworld, two intruding strangers with the star of the show nowhere to be found. Endou and I sat scowling on opposite sides of the small

courtyard table. The cost-benefit ratio of this interaction was absolutely dismal. It brought new meaning to the word *pointless*.

Suddenly, it dawned on me that I hadn't actually seen Mizuo in quite some time—not even a quick glimpse from behind as she went about her day. Instead, I kept running into Endou. That fact should have aroused my ire, but I realized I was, in a way, beginning to enjoy the absurdity of the situation.

"So tell me," I said, "have you gotten anything out of traipsing around her dreams?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I still don't understand the first thing about her."

At that, we both laughed.

"You're hopeless, you know that?"

"I don't know what's gotten into me. It's so strange." He scrunched up his face as he stared back toward the sky.

"You're a regular reprobate."

"Look who's talking."

"Heh."

"Just to be clear," he said, "I'm actually a pretty normal guy. But the more time I spend in her orbit, the more twisted up I get. At some point, I started wandering around in circles, completely lost, and then I found myself here, in this surreal forest."

"You've been mulling over your feelings for so long that they've gone rotten."

"You think so, too? I was worried that might be the case."

"It's not too late, though. You've still got a shot."

"I kinda doubt that." Endou gave a pained smile and poured more coffee from the thermos.

"I'm serious. You can still salvage this. You just have to take action."

The two of us finished off the coffee and stared at the sky a bit longer. There was still no sign of Mizuo. The only sounds in the courtyard were the gentle ins and outs of our breathing.

I stood and stretched. "Well, we ought to head back. We can't stay here forever."

Endou decisively rose to his feet with me. "Yes. You're right. You're absolutely right."

The two of us boarded the Eizan and departed from her dreamworld the same way we had arrived. When we emerged from the tiny alleyway in Tanaka Haruna, the night was still young. The air shimmered as if snow might fall at any moment, and the skin at my temples again felt distressingly taut.
“You know, you’re still a weirdo,” said Endou. “But I guess you’re not such a bad guy.”
“I resent that.”
He laughed. “See you around.”
He raised a hand in parting and walked off into the night. I turned and began the trek back to my lodgings.

The tranquil residential neighborhood reminded me of Mizuo’s fondness for sleep. When we first began dating, her schedule was quite hectic, with time outside class largely consumed by shifts at a local pachinko parlor. When she did have free time, she liked to catch up on sleep, and she could do it virtually anywhere, under any circumstances. She’d curl up like a cat and doze off beside me, and I’d sit watching her at peace, my thoughts wandering. Occasionally, I’d think, *What in the blazes am I doing with my life?*
I sincerely believed—so thoroughly had lust usurped logic—that the ease with which she fell asleep was thanks to a sense of safety my presence imparted. I don’t think I’ve known such heights of hubris before or since.
Looking back, I’ve a better idea of what was actually happening. What I took for a peaceful nap was actually an escape. I saw Mizuo at rest in my room, when in truth she was aboard the Eizan, swaying with the train’s motions as it traded dark city streets for a mysterious land of green. She’d been whisked away to lush thickets and vast meadows, where the warm, bright sun shines eternal, and the magnificent Tower stands in wait.
I’m not the type to get sentimental about the past. Still, I had to admit that this particular realization imparted a sense of emptiness. My shoes slapped ruefully against the cold asphalt as I made my way home.

By the time I reached Shirakawa Street, flurries of snow were descending upon the world. I felt a sudden hankering for my favorite homemade cinnamon toast, so I stopped by the convenience store to pick up a loaf of bread before the final

ascent to my lodgings. Once I had my purchase in hand, I trudged up the tail end of Mikage Street, mentally replaying the encounter with Endou.

I stopped and exhaled sharply, spilling a great cloud of white into the surrounding atmosphere.

What in the name of all that's righteous had compelled me to console *Endou*?! This was the man who had accused *me* of stalking while attempting to conceal his own indecorous behavior!

He had insulted me. He had sealed up my door with tape and turned my cozy home into a kingdom of roaches. But for some inexplicable reason, I'd begun playing the part of the wise elder friend out of some teenage television drama, offering hackneyed advice about why he needed to treat his girl right.

To what end?!

I took stock of the stinking slosh of sentimentality I'd allowed to wash over me. I spat curses at myself.

"Fool! This, after you vowed to do away with emotion and all its absurdity?!"

My brother-in-arms was preparing to lay siege on Christmas fascism, and I was pandering to Endou. How could I face my compatriots now?

I spun the purchased bag of bread angrily at my side and stomped up the steps to my building.

What did I care if Endou was happy—or Mizuo for that matter? It was none of my concern.

I swore under my breath to never again let myself get wrapped up in silly affairs of the heart. *Never again.*

In high school, the biggest event of the year is the school festival. Students are in such a frenzy to prepare that they neglect their classes. They pour their hearts into great, ballooning fantasies of what could be, sometimes going so far as to exult in their own callow adolescence. Then, when the festival itself is over, the students gather round the evening bonfire lit to celebrate all their hard work. The ethereal exuberance reaches its apex. Boys' and girls' cheeks flush hot, and in the mesmerizing glow of the roaring fire, they feel as if they—and indeed, the entire reinforced concrete school building—are weightless, floating thirty centimeters above the ground.

It is a heady milieu. Untold numbers of weak-willed students are swept up by the mood, sending them flitting about like mayflies in search of mates. That is to say, the school festival is arguably the single greatest producer of high school couples. It's a mass assembly line of manufactured romance. For the majority of the student body, it induces a chronic subfebrile state in which the mind loses all capacity for reason. The poor young things fall to delirium. They mistake their mundane existence for something exotic. Their romantic delusions bulldoze the sensory threshold. In the time it takes an onlooker to exclaim "Goodness gracious!" the surrounding streets are already swarming with happy-looking couples walking home from school hand in hand.

As a young man of logic, I detested this facet of the school festival. Each year, my stomach turned at the sight. I saw my peers scurrying for love and perceived them as starving rats wrestling over the last few morsels of food. They were animals in estrus. I laughed ruefully at their plight, quite certain that I myself would never suffer the buffoonery that ailed their minds.

Christmas is the school festival on a nationwide scale. It is the collective derangement of an entire population. The anguished high school student takes solace in the fact that the madness around him is confined to one place. He need merely leave the school grounds, and the oppressive atmosphere fades. But from Christmas, there is no such escape. No matter where you run or how long you stay holed up in your lodgings, Christmas is always there, pressing in on you. Its festive message invades the home screen of your cell phone, the words of college acquaintances, the programs on TV and articles in newspapers and contents of every other medium. Christmas hounds you day and night. It offers no respite.

You try to hide under your blankets, but the awful smiling masses cry out to you, "Wake up! You can't stay in your room forever! Christmas is almost here!"

The holiday was almost upon us. Shikama's cheeks grew gaunter with each passing day. He began to exude the air of a dedicated Shinsengumi trooper, his sharp eyes threatening, *Keep your distance—or taste my steel.* (Of course, this attitude was in no way driven by feelings of jealousy or incessant lusting after the women he passed on the street.)

We often supped together at Kenya, a diner on Mikage Street. Each evening I saw him, he struck me as a bit more emaciated than before, as if he were slowly transforming into one of those statues of Siddhartha beneath the sacred fig tree. I found myself concerned for my friend's health. I wondered if this year he would even make it to Christmas Eve.

In any case, we could feel the demon festival creeping close. The twenty-fifth was but days away. As I mentioned earlier, Shikama always resisted its arrival with everything he had, and the prolonged state of tension usually resulted in a high fever come Christmas morn, followed by a full day spent bedridden. I mean that in a very literal sense. That was the intensity with which Shikama opposed the Yule.

At this, our most recent dinner together, Shikama was scarfing down monstrous bites of hamburg steak as he inquired, "So what's the news on Endou?"

"I don't know, and I don't care."

"Egad! You're letting him be? Are you quite certain you're okay with that?"

"I'm done thinking about him. Let him do what he wants. I don't give a damn."

"Hmm. Well, if you've made your peace with it…," Shikama replied. "Of course, that's probably for the best. Christmas is close. We'll need all our attentions focused on what's to come."

A dubious grin worked its way across his cheeks. I wondered what convoluted plans for the Eejanaika Uprising were swirling behind Shikama's emaciated eye sockets. The very prospect had my stomach churning. I brought a finger to my nose to check for blood.

Admittedly, Shikama had a tendency to embellish. It was entirely possible that his concept of a "Christmas Eve revolution" would turn out to be thoroughly unremarkable. Based on the uprising's ridiculous name alone, I had a hard time imagining a bloodbath in the streets. At the same time, my everyday conversations with Shikama provided little clue as to what precisely his uprising was supposed to entail.

Nonetheless, this was his fifth year subjected to the torment of Christmas fascism. Clearly, he saw this as his final stand. I only prayed, both for his sake and for the collective dignity of our small circle, that we wouldn't end up reliving the misery of a certain past holiday season.

It was the winter of our second year. The four of us were on our traditional mid-December stroll through Shijo Kawaramachi. Every year around that time, we paid a collective visit to the Suzuki Record Shop on Teramachi Street. There, we'd purchase a calendar for the new year—one that featured glossy photographs of whatever female pop stars were currently in vogue, entirely for the purpose of keeping ourselves abreast of cultural trends. After that, we'd casually roam the city streets, exuding combative vibes, as if to insinuate to everyone we encountered *What's so great about Christmas, anyway?*

That particular year, however, we were waylaid by a fierce winter wind. It pierced our downy armor, assailing our morale until we erupted in argument about whether we were actually accomplishing anything and why we'd come out that night at all. By the time the storm of harsh words and needlessly hurt feelings subsided, we were huddled sullenly on one bank of the Kamo at the base of the Great Sanjo Bridge.

The river flowed by cold and uncaring. We could hear each other's teeth chatter. Couples slowly walked across the bridge, hand in hand, and we stared up at them, our eyes narrow, mouths spitting impulsive curses. Some of them shot angry glances back. Eventually, the cold sapped our strength so thoroughly that we could no longer maintain our antagonism. Takayabu the giant began to weave back and forth in the cold northern wind, singing:

Not of this world 'tis this tale of sorrow.
Down at the base of the trail to Mount Shide…

Ido and I puffed away on cigarettes wordlessly, and Shikama began humming a rivaling set of refrains—ones I quickly placed as the Izumiya supermarket jingle:

Great products, low prices! You'll find it at Izumiya!

After a moment, Shikama fell silent. In his eyes were the faint reflections of city lights shimmering on the far bank. Only Takayabu—bushy, full-bearded Takayabu—sang on:

Stack a stone for Pa, and stack a stone for Ma.
The child toils alone, building blessings for kin.
But when the sun sinks, the bank fills with ogres
to knock down his work, and tear hope asunder…

Shikama and I were on our way to the Kyoto Station building, located on Hachijo Street. We'd heard a rumor that a monstrous Christmas tree was on display at the base of the station's grand staircase, and we thought a visit might prove an excellent opportunity to steel our resolve in the lead-up to the Eejanaika Uprising. A warm-up skirmish, so to speak. We decided to situate ourselves right at the base of the tree and begin by observing the local populace. I figured, if opportunity arose, I could poach a few Santa Clauses as well, which we could later chop up for a nice Saint Nicholas hot pot.

The massive, artificial tree seemed to pierce the sky itself. It was wrapped with coil after coil of twinkling lights. Couples stood hand in hand at its base, undeterred by the cold, relentless wind blowing down from the top of the staircase. They eagerly snapped photos of themselves beside the plastic boughs in commemoration of their visit. Frankly, I didn't see the appeal.

Shikama and I stood with our hands stuffed in our pockets, chilled not only by the wind. I hadn't spotted a single Santa and was beginning to resign myself to the possibility that I might end the day without any meat for our hot pot.

Right around the time that our worldly jealousy felt good and piqued, I received a call. The voice at the other end was shrill. For the longest time, I couldn't determine who it was or what the call was about. After several failed attempts to communicate, I finally determined that the person squawking incoherently at me was Takayabu. From what I could gather, he'd become the object of a woman's affections and was having a great deal of difficulty coming to terms with the discovery. The man sounded terrified. I tried to ascertain details, but in the end, I was unable to find out who the woman was, how they'd met, or what manner of drama was unfolding.

"I don't understand. This is cause for celebration, is it not?" I said.

"There must be some mistake!" howled Takayabu, clearly on the verge of tears. "How can this be happening?!"

"What are you talking about? She's into you, yes? This might be your only chance. You really can't afford to run from it."

"But—but…! I mean, just the *idea* of it! A girl! Liking me! It goes against natural reason!"

Internally, I agreed wholeheartedly with his assessment. But I urged my friend on, if only for his sake.

“Don’t be a fool,” I chided. “One woman’s poison is another’s passion.”
“Wh-what should I do? She’s at the door right now. I’m scared!”
“Don’t think. Just get over there and talk to her.”
“I—I can’t. She’s too real. She moves. She’s alive. She’s *three-dimensional*!”
“Calm down. Of *course* she’s real. Don’t tell me you honestly planned to live your whole life lusting after girls on screens.”
To be honest, I wasn’t sure whether to rejoice for the man or pity him. The world is ruled by cruel, merciless gods that find joy in our torment. My compatriots and I had cast off the yoke of society and after a great many travails managed to acquire the skills necessary to survive in the scorching desert of our newfound existence. We’d achieved a suitable measure of self-satisfaction. Why, then, did the gods deem it necessary to dangle unwanted blessings before our eyes? And more importantly, if they were going to toss Takayabu a bone, why the hell couldn’t they toss me one, too?
Takayabu emitted a prolonged sob and then announced into the receiver, “I think I’m going to go away for a while.”
And with that, he ended the call.
The man was a gentle giant. His bizarre appearance made it easy to forget that the soul inside was crafted of terribly fragile glass. He was Hideaki Tokunaga’s half-broken radio. Come to think of it, I felt certain I’d heard the tinkling of crystal shards at the other end of the line, just before Takayabu hung up.
“What was that about?” asked Shikama, looking displeased. His hair was disheveled from the gusts of icy wind ripping through the station. It lent him a curious appearance, like an elderly schoolchild.
“Takayabu seems to have broken,” I explained.
Even today, as I pen this record, I haven’t managed to unravel the mysteries of the terror that beset my friend that day.

The call from Takayabu dampened our resolve. Shikama and I began to pace listlessly in the vicinity of the giant Christmas tree until we finally left the station altogether. We were loath, however, to end our day on such an anticlimactic note. We needed a victory, however small, to turn our mood.

So with a bag of cheap charcoal, a tray of cheap meat, and our two noble souls bundled up in our arms, we made our way to Ginkaku Temple, where we followed the trail around back and up Mount Daimonji.

From the trailhead, it's a leisurely thirty-minute hike to the burn site. Once there, we stood in the wide clearing, taking in the nighttime beauty of Kyoto below. Far out to the west, we could see two large black gaps in the glittering cityscape. These were the dark forested masses of the Kyoto Imperial Palace and Mount Yoshida. To the south, Kyoto Tower erupted from the ground. Shikama liked to refer to it as the city's manhood, and I have to admit that it's a rather fitting description, given the way it juts suggestively above the rest of the Kyoto skyline.

The wind at the burn site was unrelenting, and it was accompanied by occasional flurries of snow. We'd heroically ascended the mountain in the dead of winter, but now we stood with arms wrapped tight against our chests, robbed of our speech by the extreme cold. The sooner the barbecue was over, the sooner we could flee back to lower ground.

It occurred to us that the inclement weather could be a sign. Perhaps the god of the mountain was enraged by our presence, and the howling wind was his divine voice bellowing, "Fools! Intrude ye not upon this hallowed ground!" We immediately poured body and mind into heartfelt prayer, begging the god of the mountain to forgive us our trespass.

Instead, the wind grew stronger. The sweat from our climb froze into tiny icicles, and our joints refused to bend.

Around us, patches of withered grass fluttered in the wind among the long, sweeping lines marked out by large, cross-shaped fire pits. In August, the pits would host giant bonfires, forming a massive *kanji* character visible throughout the city—the "*dai*" from which Daimonji gets its name.

We picked one nearby fire pit, stuffed the concrete troughs with newspaper and charcoal, and threw a grate on top. Most of the world assumes that the term *Daimonji-yaki* primarily refers to the *Gozan no Okuribi*, the ancient celebration held during the summer *obon* holiday in which five giant characters are written out in fire across five of the city's peaks. In fact, the term more properly refers to the commandeering of one of the fire pits on Mount Daimonji's burn site for an impromptu barbecue party.

We lit the newspaper, and it burned readily, but the incessant wind soon swept up the embers, sending them cascading down the mountain slope. If we'd believed nothing could chill our insides further, this development proved us wrong.

Every student in Kyoto dreams of toying with the summertime festivities—the ultimate practical joke on the city. Hide out on the peak before the fires are lit, build an extra bonfire of your own, and suddenly the giant, smoldering character gains an extra stroke that changes its meaning entirely. But imagining something is a far cry from actually doing it. Shikama and I were hardly so rash and indiscrete as to create the spectacle—and certainly not now, so far out of season. I imagined the headlines: WILDFIRE ON MOUNT DAIMONJI. GINKAKU TEMPLE BURNS TO THE GROUND. EYEWITNESS REPORTS INDICATE TWO MALE SUSPECTS IN KYOTO ARSON CASE. It was a brand of celebrity I could definitely do without.

Thus, Shikama and I tumbled down the hillside like SWAT operatives in pursuit of the stray embers. We wielded plastic drink bottles, splashing oolong tea in all directions in a valiant display of firefighting prowess. My compatriots and I well know the importance of brushing away the flames that fall upon us and extinguishing the ones that tumble from our own hands. A gentleman must ever be on guard for fire.

After a few more failed attempts back at the pit, we finally managed a steady campfire. The charcoal began to pulse, and we greedily laid strips of meat across the grate, also tossing on hand-shredded clumps of *eryngii* mushrooms and green peppers. I'd packed some warm sake in a thermos, which I proceeded to pour into two cups, handing one to Shikama. We are certainly no connoisseurs of alcoholic beverages, but I would venture that the sake we drank that night was among the finest pairings for a mountaintop view of Kyoto's glittering lights. It warmed us through and through as the meat began to sizzle.

Shikama, intent on doing everything possible this year to avoid developing a fever and collapsing on Christmas, had taken to quaffing concentrated turmeric energy drinks day and night. Thanks to the drinks, his already potent musk had reached new levels, and it occurred to me that the habit might in fact be counterproductive to his overarching goals. Nonetheless, I held my tongue.

And whether it was due to the turmeric, I could not say, but lately his imagination was even wilder than usual. Now, with Christmas just around the corner, he had developed an intense fear that some unknown entity was conspiring to thwart our plans. He confided to me that he believed the incident with Takayabu was incontrovertible proof of someone or something hot on our heels.

Our potential foes were many and included the likes of the National Public Safety Commission, the Intelligence Division of the Ground Staff Office, the Shimogamo Police Station, the mounted forces of the Kyoto Prefectural Police's Heian Cavalry, certified members of the Greenland International Santa Claus Association, the National Mistletoe Lovers' Association, and the Aya Matsuura Official Fan Club.

"Remain vigilant," he cautioned.

Shikama had been in a relationship with a woman just once. At the time, he was working occasional shifts as an instructor at a cram school to help cover his living expenses. In short, he managed to bag one of the high school girls attending his class. Or to put it more tastefully, he blatantly abused his position of authority to win her affections.

Mizuo was a chapter of my life yet to be written, so the fact that Shikama had managed to secure a relationship when I was still alone left me rather disquieted. I was a bit enraged at the time, to be honest. I felt as if my trusted compatriot had succumbed and taken the easy path through life, and for a time, I even considered severing our friendship. I also refused to believe that some run-of-the-mill high school girl could ever hope to comprehend Shikama's greatness. After all, this was a man to whom I tipped *my* hat. To think that there was a brat of not yet twenty toying with his heart… Well, I imagine my feeling of disgust was similar to that of a young woman who learns that her father has eloped with an even younger girl.

But I digress.

There is a red Ferris wheel at the HEP Five shopping mall in Umeda. I've yet to see it with my own eyes, but I've heard the talk. It is a place where young couples flock daily to spin around and around in one spot and inexplicably not tire of the unchanging scenery. While on a date in Osaka with the

aforementioned girl, Shikama had decided it might be nice to visit the famed attraction.

Once they were waiting in line, Shikama began to grow restless. One can hardly imagine what words they exchanged, but they must have appeared to be a normal couple to anyone observing. However, when they finally reached the front of the line, and it was their turn to hop aboard, Shikama climbed into the gondola alone. When the girl tried to climb in after him, he turned and blocked the way.

“No,” he explained. “This one is my gondola.”

Shikama shut the door and proceeded to enjoy his arc through the Umeda sky. When he disembarked, she was gone.

Let me assure you, this all actually happened.

On learning of this tale, I’m sure some of you will think Shikama quite the fool. I am inclined to agree. To this day, Shikama looks back on the event with a mix of pride and bitterness, referring to it as his “grand design to propel himself into desert exile.”

It was Christmas Eve, two years past. Roughly six months had elapsed since I successfully inveigled Mizuo, and what careful checks I’d once had on my emotions had failed completely, allowing my mind to run freely through a wasteland of shame. This was to be my first romantic Christmas Eve, and I felt as if every part of me from crown to toe had been pumped full of helium. I was walking on air. I was possessed with an absurd, base desire to fully experience the customary enjoyments of a young man in love, and I’d accordingly arranged for us to celebrate the occasion with dinner at her apartment. I cycled all the way to Gion to procure a suitable Christmas gift, along with a reservation ticket for a festive bucket of chicken from KFC.

When I arrived at Mizuo’s apartment that night, I found that she’d even prepared us a homemade chocolate cake for dessert. The three of us anxiously sat down to begin our meal.

Apologies, dear readers. I suppose I should clarify. In addition to Mizuo and me, Shikama was also in attendance, for reasons I’ll attempt to explain. I fully recognize how tactless it is to invite a third party to join in on what should be an intimate dinner for two. You would be very right to chastise me for roping

Shikama into our Christmas Eve celebration. However, he was not there at my invitation. Mizuo was the one who had requested his presence.

She seemed to have taken a rather keen interest in this inscrutable acquaintance of whom I often spoke. And to be honest, I was quite pleased to see the morbid curiosity take hold. Come to think of it, at the time Mizuo joined our club, she was the only incoming member to display no fear of Takayabu. She had boldly approached the bearded giant, huddled in gloom, and struck up a conversation.

That said, you may still question Shikama's integrity. It's one thing to receive an invitation to intrude upon a couple's special night—and quite another to actually show up, totally nonchalant. But that is a failure on Shikama's part, not mine.

We gorged ourselves on chicken and were about to turn our attentions to Mizuo's homemade cake. I decided that this was the ideal moment to pull out my thoughtful, carefully selected Christmas gift. It was wrapped in a pretty sheaf of decorative paper and adorned with a bow. Mizuo began to unwrap it. The paper came away to reveal a high-tech *maneki-neko* with an automatic waving arm, capable of nigh-perpetual motion thanks to a tiny solar panel on its base. As mentioned, I'd gone to a great deal of trouble to acquire the gift, pedaling my bicycle all the way to Gion, where I had purchased it for a very handsome sum and had it professionally wrapped.

Mizuo held the cat in hand, staring at it for quite some time. Eventually, she placed it on the table and flicked the paw with one finger, setting the cat's arm into rhythmic motion.

"I prefer not to clutter my room with unnecessary belongings," she said.

A chill descended upon the room—a *second* chill, compounding the cold of the late December night. I froze in place. Shikama, desperate for somewhere else to focus his attention, began to slice the cake. All the while, the cat's paw bobbed limply back and forth, marking each painstaking moment of silence.

After a span of seconds that felt like days, Mizuo and I erupted in a very terse, very heated argument—or so I'm told. Shikama was apparently forced into the awkward and very unsuitable role of arbiter. It seems he both helped and aggravated the situation in turns. My memory of the events is hazy at best, but I do recall a very clear sense of incredulity that anyone could be so upset over

such a novel gift or that they could openly malign both it and its giver so cruelly.
Looking back, that should have been the point at which I realized the futility of my ridiculous aspiration. I should have abandoned my pursuit of ordinary happiness right then and there. But I swore in my heart that I would redeem myself the following year.
Only later would I realize that I'd never get the chance.
On reading this tale, I'm sure some of you will think me quite the fool. I am inclined to agree. To this day, I look back on the event with a mix of pride and bitterness, referring to it as the Solar-Powered *Maneki-neko* Incident.

Incidentally, I would say that the individual most deserving of pity that evening was Shikama. For a while, he made fumbling attempts to mediate, but the experience quickly wore on his nerves. Ultimately, he threw up his hands in defeat and weakly announced, "I'm going home." He staggered out unsteadily into the night, and I've no idea how he spent the remainder of his Christmas Eve. Perhaps he collapsed with fever and was confined to bed.
Nonetheless, his sister found the tale of my evening quite amusing. From then on, whenever her brother brought home some unusual new purchase, she would exclaim with a devilish grin, "I prefer not to clutter my room with unnecessary belongings."
She seemed to thoroughly enjoy this twisted little joke. In fact, on initially hearing the particulars of the Solar-Powered *Maneki-neko* Incident, I'm told she was so overcome with laughter that she fell on the floor, gasping for air. When she finally regained her breath, the first thing she asked her brother was, "So wait, why were *you* there?"
I'm sure Shikama must have been at a loss to answer.

What is the nature of these inscrutable urges that drive us? If we had chosen to live our lives in the manner society prescribes, we may well have been granted ordinary happiness, complete with tickets to join in on Christmas festivities without reserve. We may have never conspired to reenact the Eejanaika Uprising—lack of historical parallel to our plight notwithstanding.

It’s easy for us to obfuscate, portraying our actions as a righteous rejection of mediocrity. We like to style ourselves as unwilling to settle for a cookie-cutter existence on account of our insufferable greatness.
But in truth…
In truth, my compatriots and I would on occasion feel otherwise. There were times when we begrudgingly admitted that an ordinary, cookie-cutter happiness might not be so bad.

Shikama and I were still braving the icy wind on Mount Daimonji. We refilled each other’s sake cups and continued to gaze upon the Kyoto night as we turned our thoughts to the events of the past five years.
We hadn’t yet worked out the details, but we felt quite certain that somehow, in some way, everyone else in the world was fundamentally mistaken. We knew it had to be so, because it was impossible that we could be the ones in the wrong.
We repeated that declaration to ourselves over and over like a mantra. But the more we recited it, the more we had to admit that the lights of the city had chipped our armor, and their warmth had found purchase to seep into our souls.
The meat on the grill was nearly done. Shikama plucked a charred piece of *eryngii* mushroom with his chopsticks. As he did so, he began to relate a very strange story:
As one approaches Tofukuji Station aboard the Keihan train line, the Japanese Red Cross Kyoto Daiichi Hospital is just visible above the residential jumble. It is a wide, squat piece of architecture reminiscent of a fortress or an old, abandoned factory. In fact, if you were to miss the symbol of the cross on the building, you would never guess it was a hospital at all. And while large medical centers always seem to manifest a strong, frightening presence, I have yet to encounter any that rivals the Kyoto Daiichi Hospital’s unnerving aura.
A very long time ago, Shikama paid a visit to a woman undergoing treatment in that hospital. (However, to be abundantly clear, this is merely a dream he once had.)

At the time, Shikama was residing in a one-story apartment building near Hyakumanben.

Though he now displays considerable diligence in his studies for the bar exam, at the time, Shikama was known to his peers as a prolific sleeper. It is a well-known fact that college students rank behind only infants in the amount of sleep they require each day. And if my own experience is anything to go by, all hours of slumber past the eighth are spent wandering myriad dreamscapes. Excessive sleep is completely unproductive—but it does produce dreams.

At any rate, let's get back to the story. Shikama found himself in his apartment, where he was busily tapping away on his cell phone, absorbed in a text message exchange with an unspecified recipient. He did know that the person on the other end was a woman and that the two of them shared a warmth suitable to acquaintances who have spent a good deal of time together. Beyond that, details were vague. Shikama couldn't discern her precise identity or how he had come to be texting her. However, he knew that the exchange was bringing him a great sense of fulfillment.

At some point, Shikama learned that the woman on the other end was currently hospitalized, and he promptly decided to pay her a visit.

When he arrived, she was asleep in bed. The hospital room was devoid of any other occupants. In fact, aside from the immaculate white bed and the patient herself, it was devoid of anything. Even the view from the window was blurred out by a dismal gray rain.

Shikama felt an overwhelming desire to whisk the woman away to some other place. He felt her condition would only worsen if she stayed there in the hospital. But before he could carry her out, he had to wait for the rain to let up. Consequently, there was no need to rouse her from sleep just yet. By the time the rain cleared, surely she'd wake on her own. Shikama settled in to wait, lowering himself to a stool at her bedside. He stared off into space, waiting for her slumber to end.

Eventually, he realized the truth. She would never wake. He suddenly recalled that she'd been sleeping for a hundred years. And as soon as that fact resurfaced in his mind, he noticed that she was already dead.

Shikama stood up forcefully, as if trying to dislodge the strange dream from his mind. He turned to the tiny spindle of Kyoto Tower in the distance and shouted, "Dammit all! I won't give in!"

And then, with pursed lips, he quietly added, “When do I get *my* turn to be happy?”
He shook his head, looked at me, and said, “I’d implore you to pretend you never heard that.”

In the time we’d spent grumbling atop the mountain, our bodies had grown so cold that we began to think the back doors to our souls might freeze solid. We put out our fire and began the hike down.
“Are you quite sure you don’t have any plans for Christmas Eve?” asked Shikama.
“What’s with the sudden concern?”
“Because if you do, by all means, don’t mind me. I’m perfectly able to carry the uprising out on my own.”
“You insult me, my friend.”
We made it off the mountain and parted ways at the canal just off the street leading to Ginkaku Temple. Shikama mounted his beloved bicycle and gallantly sped off along Imadegawa Street.

In the middle of the night, I received a call from Shikama: He was in the hospital.
He’d been cycling down Higashikuramaguchi Street when he lost control and went flying headfirst over the handlebars. His chin struck the asphalt, resulting in a five-stitch gash. Apparently, he’d staggered all the way to the emergency room unassisted, blood pouring down his chin for the entire journey.
As for the crash, it was unclear whether that was due to Shikama’s habit of staring intently at women walking along the street or the overabundance of concentrated turmeric energy drinks he’d been quaffing as of late. Perhaps the turmeric had begun to disturb his homeostasis rather than maintain it.
“I heard shouting,” he griped into the receiver. “Very strange shouts, from an equally strange group of individuals.”
“How so?”
“They had loud baritone voices, and they were following me. They were shouting ‘Hey-oh! Hey-oh! Heeey-oh!’ That’s the reason I crashed. The voices distracted me.”

“They must have been monks in training. Sometimes they walk around the city.”
“No, this was something else entirely. Big, brawny men in full-body unitards. They were covered from head to toe.”
I had no idea what he was talking about, nor why the conversation suddenly involved unitards.
“You’re talking nonsense again,” I told him. “Please try to calm down. You’ll run a fever at this rate.”
“There were four of them, I tell you! And they were carrying a giant golden carp!”
And with that last, completely inscrutable declaration, he hung up the phone.
I began to fear that Shikama had reached his limit.
Let us imagine: I’m walking down the street, nearing the Hyakumanben intersection when I hear shouting from the east. “Hey-oh! Hey-oh! Heeey-oh!” I turn to find four burly men at the crosswalk, hustling in my direction. Each is clad from head to toe in a gray unitard, his face and every other bit of skin obscured. The men’s arms are extended high above their heads, effortlessly carrying some indistinct object in the manner of a *mikoshi*. All the while, they continue to shout in their deep, baritone voices. “Hey-oh! Hey-oh! Heeey-oh!” The men move in what can only be described as a half walk, half dance, and as they draw closer, I finally see what it is they’re carrying.
Held aloft by the muscled arms is my good friend Shikama. He squirms and flails his limbs in an attempt to escape. His mouth emits a steady wail over the men’s rhythmic chants. All I can do is stand in shock as he’s carried past. The four men glance back at me briefly as they continue on, bounding off toward Mount Daimonji.
I sat for a while, centered in my four-and-a-half-mat room, playing around with this scene in my mind.
I prayed that for once—this year, at least—my friend would not collapse with a fever on Christmas morn.

Eventually, it became clear that what had been chasing Shikama that night was not a group of burly men clad from head to toe in unitards.

Shikama had taken an early dinner in the Central Cafeteria. He absentmindedly piled his tray with ginger-fried pork, cabbage-nested eggs, miso soup, and white rice and then absentmindedly chose a seat. It was only after sitting down that he saw her. Seated right across from him was the woman who topped Shikama's list of those deemed currently worthy of his attentions—and the woman who had grown visibly suspicious of Shikama's constant staring. As you'll recall, Shikama's discomfort had grown to the point where he intensely feared any encounter with her, even if legitimately by happenstance.

Shikama stifled a gasp. The woman looked up at him, and she, too, gasped. Shikama was overcome with the urge to leave as soon as possible. Cursing his spinelessness, he remained seated, scarfing down his meal at roughly three times his regular speed. Once finished, he stood up and darted away.

Why must he be obliged to flee in such a situation? My heart goes out to the man.

Having escaped, Shikama decided to head to the University Library. The dinner, insufficiently masticated and now stewing in violently gurgling digestive juices, felt heavy in his gut. Nonetheless, he found a seat and immersed himself in the memorization of various legal precedents pertaining to the Civil Code. The burst of inspiration did not last long, and Shikama began to instead doodle a picture of Jeremy, the weird, interdimensional life-form from the animated Beatles film, *Yellow Submarine*. He was soon engrossed in the exercise, adding more and more detail to the drawing until eventually Jeremy was surrounded by a vast field of intricate shrubs and flowers.

After about thirty minutes spent immersed in that pursuit, Shikama sat back with a deep sigh of relief. This wasn't what he'd set out to do, but it still felt like a significant accomplishment. As he basked in self-satisfaction, he peered around the library—and immediately regretted doing so.

Among the forest of student heads, he caught sight of her again, the same woman from before. She was sitting on the far side of the study room. Their eyes met, and she stared back icy daggers. Shikama hastily turned away. When he felt he'd waited long enough, he risked another glance. The woman had already packed up her study materials and left.

Shikama was disconsolate. He'd lost all appetite for further doodling. But he desperately wanted to avoid another encounter with the woman, so he waited

for some time to pass before finally packing his own things and leaving the library behind.

Fearing another misunderstanding if he loitered about campus, he determined that the responsible course of action was to return directly to his lodgings. The whole situation was devastating to him. He began to feel as though there was no place for him in Kyoto.

Little did he know, the day's trials had only just begun. As he grabbed his bike, a devil's whisperings reached his ear. If he was headed to his lodgings, why not stop by the video shop? It was on the way, after all.

Shikama's sister was away visiting their parents in Osaka. He had the whole place to himself. How long had it been since he last defanged his raging inner beast? Tonight, he would extract the toxins that had been allowed to accumulate inside his mind, emerging on the other side as a better, more tolerant member of society—and in the process securing a night of deep, comfortable sleep. Surely any of us can understand and forgive him his small detour, given such noble intent.

It was past dark as he sped along Higashikuramaguchi Street, just beyond Nishiiori Bridge and the canal that snakes north to its confluence with the Takano. It's a poorly lit stretch of road, owing to a dearth of streetlights.

Shikama was nearing a white three-story apartment building when he caught sight of a young woman locking up her bicycle in the building's small parking area along the street. Just as Shikama passed, she finished securing the bike and turned to head inside. The fluorescent bulbs mounted on the nearest telephone pole cast a wan light upon her face, and their eyes met.

It was her.

"Just to be clear," Shikama would later insist, as he recounted the story, "I was not stalking her."

Shikama would never forget the mix of astonishment, terror, and disgust on her face at that third coincidental meeting.

He zipped away, still hurtling down Higashikuramaguchi Street, now wondering what manner of inauspicious star had shone overhead on the day of his birth.

No! he'd wanted to shout. It's not what it looks like! I didn't follow you home; I swear!

But he couldn’t. The tragedy of his situation was clear. The more staunchly he denied wrongdoing or insisted upon coincidence, the more he’d back himself into a corner. The situation was beyond resolving. It was a wretched failure on his part but also a bitter injustice thrust upon him by a cruel world, and as he scrunched up his face in indignation, he allowed his eyes to squeeze shut for just the briefest moment. And in that fleeting instant, his front tire lurched over a bump in the sidewalk, sending Shikama over the handlebars and elegantly careening through the air.

When I set foot in Gion, the day’s shadows were long and growing. The gate of the Yasaka Shrine was wet with recent rain, and it shone a brilliant vermillion. There was a restless throng gathering in the area as evening fell, which only increased my feeling of discomfort. Still, I forged ahead. I was on a mission to reclaim my beloved.

Tourists and students loitered on the shrine’s wide, shallow staircase, intoxicated by the spectacle of the sun setting at the far end of Shijo Street.

I made my way hastily past the shrine gate, crossed at the traffic signal, and slid open the glass door of the Gion Police Box. The interior was dim and cramped, and the stagnant air lazily swirled across my cheek. Several officers stood or sat in the limited space available. When one of them looked me in the eye, I was seized by a sudden fantasy that I was there for a different reason; the Kyoto Prefectural Public Safety Commission had received a tip about Shikama’s plans for the Eejanaika Uprising, and I’d come to turn myself in to the authorities. I suppressed a cowardly and wholly unnecessary urge to fall to my knees, prostrate myself, and beg forgiveness.

Instead, I puffed out my chest as best as I could and announced, “I received a call about some stolen property.”

I gave my name, and a kindly officer who looked to be near retirement said, “Ah yes. Thanks for coming all the way out here.”

The officer was extremely courteous. He guided me to a desk and handed me a form to fill out. While I did so, he exited the police box, circling around to the back.

When he returned, my beloved was in tow.

“I’m afraid the lock’s been cut,” the officer explained.

But I hardly heard the words. At long last, I was reunited with my precious Manami.

I recognized the irony. A mere two weeks ago, Endou had been hurling insults at me and threatening to call the police. I'd departed the scene in such haste I had inadvertently left my beloved bicycle behind. Now I was retrieving her from the same authorities, indebted to them for their stalwart public service.

According to the police, Manami was found tearing haphazardly through the city streets, spurred on by some unidentified riffraff. The lawless degenerate was charged with embezzlement of lost property, and Manami was taken into protective custody. Just deserts, if I say so myself. I was enraged by the behavior of this cowardly criminal I'd never met and never would, but the important thing was that Manami was back safe at my side.

"Thank you. Really. Thank you very much," I said, bowing my head to the kindly old officer.

Manami and I departed the police box, handlebar in hand. For a time, we simply walked together, enjoying the sights of Gion, my free hand gently caressing her saddle. An unfamiliar squeaking from her wheels had me slightly concerned. But damaged parts could be replaced. Faulty workings could be substituted. Manami herself could not. I vowed that henceforth, no matter what happened and no matter what danger I faced, I would never again leave her behind in hasty flight.

We basked in that joy of reunion for some time, but eventually I allowed my eyes to wander. I gazed out over the bustling crowds of Gion awash in golden sunset. I decided that so long as I was already here, I might as well pay a long-overdue visit to the Gion Kaikan.

The Gion Kaikan is located along Higashioji Street near the Yasaka Shrine. I'd been a regular patron for all five years of my Kyoto residence. It is a small cinema that exclusively screens double features from bygone eras. While the crowds it attracts on the weekends are not insignificant, during the week only a smattering of seats are ever occupied, like a handful of beans tossed over a vast dirt field. As to the selected films themselves, they are of a middling, hard-to-describe caliber. They are not stellar productions, but neither do they deserve the indignity of being called B movies. And if anything, I find that hard-to-describe quality of the selections to be quite endearing.

On this particular day, the Gion Kaikan was sparsely occupied as usual. I ascended the few steps running along the right side of the desolate lobby and paid the admission fee to the girl at the counter, who might as well have been discussing her day with a death knell. Then I proceeded upstairs to the second floor. The first film of the current screening was already in progress, but such trifling details did not faze me. I am never so boorish as to rush to my seat.

Instead, I took my time, admiring a lustrous black Kuriyama No. 4 film projector on display in one corner. After that, I proceeded to the concessions area—a corner filled with vending machines just next to the entrance to the auditorium. I purchased a coffee and sat on an ebony bench to enjoy a leisurely smoke. The hall was dim, and the air was filled with the hum of the vending machines. On the wall in front of me was a mishmash of film flyers.

Beyond the heavy doors to the auditorium, I heard muffled explosions, strains of music, and the buzz of unintelligible human voices. Clearly, whatever scene was unfolding on the other side was quite spectacular.

Still I sat, with bated breath like the giant catfish at Kashima, ready to thrash and send the earth quaking at any moment. I was at the gates of the silver screen, teetering on the edge: Would I go in? Would I stay out?

I would submit that there are few individuals in this world who can thoroughly enjoy the high-minded, noble pleasure of enjoying a film via premonition alone.

In fact, such was the primary purpose of my visits to the Gion Kaikan. I wished to squat sullenly just outside the doors, visualizing, *thinking*. Often, my most satisfying visits were those in which I chose to head back home without ever setting foot inside the auditorium. I suppose one might describe it as akin to visiting a soba restaurant for the sole purpose of drinking the *soba-yu* cooking water provided at the end of the meal, leaving the noodles themselves untouched. However, as I've never actually visited a soba restaurant for that express purpose, nor have I drank *soba-yu* at all, I cannot say for certain.

I was thoroughly enjoying my sullen reprieve outside the screening-room doors when I saw a figure pause in front of the Kuriyama No. 4 film projector. After admiring the projector for a great deal of time, the figure approached me. I was irate and immediately shot them a glare. What brute dared to interrupt my precious pastime?

When I took in the figure's face, my anger turned to exasperation.

“Oh. It’s you,” I muttered.
“Yup.”
Endou nodded and sat himself down on the adjacent bench.
“I certainly hope you’re not following me again,” I said.
“No. For whatever reason, teasing you has lost its thrill.”
“Don’t you dare suggest we’re friends now. We’re not.”
“Heaven forbid.”
“So why are you here?”
“No particular reason. I just like the atmosphere of this place.”
“Ah. Understandable. I seem to recall that you’re shooting a film of your own.”
“I am.”
“Is it any good?”
“Hard to say.” He paused, then added, “Across heaven and earth, I’m afraid the only being who believes in my talents is me.”
I snorted. “I sincerely doubt that.”
We fell silent, and I lit up another cigarette.
Endou pulled out his cell phone and began tapping away at the buttons, shoulders slumped.
“I’ve been psyching myself up all day, but every time I reach my finger out…”
“What are you going on about now?” I muttered.
“Haven’t you ever experienced that? You spend hours mentally preparing yourself, but when it comes time to actually make the call, you just can’t do it.”
“A call to *her*, you mean.”
“Yeah.”
My tone grew sharp. “I can’t believe you’re still dithering about that.”
A smile touched Endou’s lips, and he said, “I’m the sensitive type. I have to take things slow, see?”
“You’re a nitwit. That’s what you are.”
“It feels like the pathway from my brain to my fingertips just gets longer and longer. My neurons are firing wildly, trying to make me press the CALL button, but the signal never arrives.”
“You sound like you’re stuck in junior high school.”

My whole body was shaking. How absurd. How uncouth. I reached out and snatched the cell phone from his hands, then jammed my index finger on the CALL button.

It barely had time to ring before a soft voice answered, “Hello?”

“Uh… Is this Mizuo?”

“Yes… Who’s calling?”

I shoved the phone back into Endou’s hands.

He panicked for a moment but managed to bring the phone to his ear, after which he began speaking in a hushed voice.

I remained at his side, sending up great plumes of white smoke from my latest cigarette. I cursed my poor fortune. Why was I compelled to sit here, enduring this sappy junior high school love drama as it unfolded in real time?

And then, with a start, I realized I wasn’t. I didn’t have to stay if I didn’t wish to. So I stood.

I was going to walk out of the theater, just like that, until Endou again turned his eyes upon me.

He was still huddled over the phone, saying, “Yeah. Day after tomorrow. Uh-huh. At Shijo.”

He bowed his head to me, ever so slightly. His smile was so wide that I thought his cheeks might split. This was the same man who, seconds ago, had slumped his shoulders in defeat, overwhelmed by the mental equivalent of a child’s puzzle ring. Now he’d transformed into something even more unbearable to behold. Endou had ascended beyond the hapless have-nots, carried by his newfound nirvana to the far bank, where he alighted gently upon the sand. He stared at me from across the Sanzu, arms casually folded, his infuriating, idiotic smile seeming to say, *Keep at it! You’ll get here in time.*

When I emerged back onto Higashioji Street, the indigo of the evening sky was dripping down to earth. I brandished both fists, full with the spirit of King Lear wandering the desolate, thundering heath in exile. I shouted to the heavens, “What sort of cruel joke is this?!”

As if in response, radio signals came tumbling from the ether into my cell phone antenna: A text had arrived from the man who had lost his dream.

Tomorrow.

Five PM.

Southeast corner of the Shijo Kawaramachi intersection.
Let nothing stay you.

I was sitting awake in my four-and-a-half-mat room late at night, mind dwelling upon the fact that tomorrow was Christmas Eve. I thought also of Endou with his condescending smile and belly stuffed with happiness to the point of bursting. It aroused in me a bitter ire that swirled and swelled. I glared at the gargantuan *maneki-neko* still hoarding one corner of my precious room, and it glared back. Its swollen porcelain gut perfectly mirrored my own sensation—insides distended by rage—yet the cat remained infuriatingly aloof.

I began to fire off questions at the cat.

"What in hell's name is so great about being in love? Why do the infatuated masses insist upon swaggering about, flaunting their happiness for all to see? Just who in the hell do these people think they are?"

Even if the tides of time take to trumpeting tender togetherness, should we not remain alert to the dangers of praising love? Love is irrational. It is a dark passion that swirls in the depths of the human heart. Though we dress it in sweet words, at the end of the day, love casts off all artifice to bare its ugly fangs. And when it does, it forces us to confront our own insanity; we bemoan our shortsightedness, but we are already too far gone.

One sometimes hears the phrase *twisted love*, but I would submit that love is a thing that is *always* twisted, from its very conception. That is why I am so bewildered to see young lovers go about so obviously delighted, so obviously high with self-satisfaction.

The people of the world gleefully fling themselves from the precipice of insanity, plunging into the waters below, where they flail and sink in plain sight of all their peers. Those yet to hurl themselves from the cliff think only of when their chance will come to struggle in the water. They bemoan their misfortune. They see their delay as a failure. A thing of shame. Oh, how misguided are their souls! It is the drowning man and the man who yearns to drown whose cheeks should be aflame!

I am proud to have stricken such silly whimsy from my life. Love is an immoral joy. It is a delight we should approach with apprehension and unease, like a forbidden fruit partaken of in secret corners away from prying eyes. It must be

recognized as the gravest of sins to treat love as a thing that readily blossoms and blooms for all, to greedily feast upon it with no regard to time or place, gnashing with open maw so that all who observe are splashed with the nectar's spray.
This I would declare to every man and woman with arms interlocked beneath the sweeping heavens:
Live if you must—but at least have the decency to be discreet about it.

Takayabu had been driven from the city, besieged by the mysterious new beauty in his life. Ido remained lodged in his dense quagmire of worldly jealousy. Shikama roamed about town with bandages on his chin, working his schemes. Yushima was stuck in his interminable spiral of self-loathing.
Mizuo continued to ride her phantasmal train. Ebizuka labored away in a shop full of foreign goods. Endou smiled his patronizing smile from paradise on the far bank of the Sanzu. And I lay in sullen silence in my hovering four-and-a-half-mat castle, cell phone clutched loosely in one hand.
A minute ticked past, and the background for my home screen changed of its own accord. The glowing rectangle now proudly displayed the words CHRISTMAS EVE—and in English, no less. It was beginning. One electronic device had already defected from my camp, right on the cusp of our valiant stand.
By the time dawn arrived, a gloomy rain was falling. Christmas Eve was here.

Eve or not, a shift was a shift, so I readied myself and made for the sushi restaurant.
When I arrived, I was told we had an order of terrifying magnitude to fill: Party platters to serve seventy-three. We started churning out rice and fish the moment I arrived, and this kept up until eleven o'clock, barely finishing with enough time left for delivery.
The unfortunate rain had grown stronger yet, and I was soaked from head to toe when the scooter pulled up at the provided address. The customer was a small, local hospital. I clutched the large platters of sushi to my chest and dashed to the entrance. But just as I made the shelter of the eaves, the power flickered out, plunging the hospital into darkness and the staff and patients into

chaos. I stepped inside to find a procession of nurses walking the hallways with lit candles in hand, unintentionally providing a very fitting scene for Christmas Eve.

Orders continued to pour in all day. The owner and I made deliveries via scooter, zooming all over town, while the owner's wife held down the fort. It was chaos. My hands, long since soaked through with the incessant rain, were on the verge of freezing solid, and I felt as though the remainder of my body and my mind would be soon to follow.

"Any plans for Christmas?" the owner's wife asked during a brief lull in the madness. She was pulling apart the sections of a satsuma, popping them into her mouth one by one.

"None at all," I replied brusquely. "It's a holiday in which I haven't the slightest interest."

My response sent the owner's wife into a fit of sweet, lilting laughter.

When my shift was over, I headed to a curry shop for a late lunch.

This particular shop ran an ongoing challenge: Finish an oversize dish of curry within a fixed time limit, and you eat for free. One wall of the shop featured photos of those who had managed the feat. Most of the photos showed crowds of young college students gathered around the victor—close friends who had come to cheer for their champion. But one photo in particular stood out. This picture had none of the youthful geniality of its neighbors. It depicted the impenetrable smiling mug of a lone, bearded giant, who held in one hand a massive platter on which not a single grain of rice remained. The giant's curious pose suggested that he might next hurl the platter across the restaurant.

I expect I needn't clarify that the giant in question was Takayabu. When money ran tight at the end of a month, he would circle through his neighborhood curry shops, beef bowl shops, and so on, completing such challenges to shave a few hundred yen from his living expenses.

As I tucked into my bowl of curry topped with deep-fried fish, I appreciated the photo and the shop's unwavering commitment to including it, despite its proudly independent aura.

Where, I wondered, had the friendly giant disappeared to? Perhaps he'd donned the robe of a depraved monk, lying low in the wilderness of Kurama to

avoid his mysterious lover. I was a bit concerned that he might be mistaken for a bear or a *tengu* and be fired upon by members of the local hunting association. In all likelihood, they wouldn't be able to tell him apart from a bear or a *tengu* even after he'd been downed. It seemed a very tragic way to go.

I mulled over these concerns as I made my way out of the shop. The rain had grown hard again while I ate. As I trudged home, I was overcome by the irritating sensation that I was being pummeled by thousands of tiny fists. The asphalt appeared to sprout a thick carpet of wool thanks to the raindrops' incessant ricochets. When I reached the Hyakumanben Post Office, I found the nearby intersection awash with the muted headlights of passing cars. Other pedestrians—most of whom held umbrellas aloft—appeared as silhouettes beyond the veil of rain. I could no longer distinguish man from woman.

I would have been very content for the rain to thunder on all evening and wash Christmas Eve away in its entirety.

I returned to my lodgings and filled a washbasin with hot water to soak my feet. The water sloshed over my numb skin, and I felt as if it were seeping inside, causing my toes to balloon outward.

My entire body was frozen through. Part of me had given up. I longed to stay where I was, holed up in my fortress where I'd weather whatever else life decided to throw at me.

My better self sought to censure this unseemly capitulation, but the swirling warmth of the washbasin was so incredibly sweet. For a time, I pushed all thoughts of our impending battle at Shijo Kawaramachi from my mind.

A knock at the door briefly interrupted my worldly indulgence, and I heard Yushima calling my name. There seemed no compelling reason to quit my washbasin paradise on account of a phantom bill collector, so I ignored him. I continued to slosh the soothing hot water over my feet.

Yushima rattled off a long, unbroken stream of speech, none of which I could make out. He might have been expounding upon his precarious state of mind as usual, or he might have been singing lines from the Railway Song. It was the voice of someone mumbling sutras, sometimes loud and sometimes soft, sometimes near and sometimes far, as if carried upon the backs of rolling waves.

Higashiyama stands to the east.
Arashiyama soars in the west.
All betwixt is the glorious city,
its waters the Kamo and Katsura.
Gion, Kiyomizu, Chion-in.
Yoshida, Kurodani, Shinnyo-do.
And up at the source where the water flows pure,
the shrines of Kamo to guard his majesty's land.

At last, I called out to him from my side of the door.
"Yushima, if I may offer a suggestion? Head to Shijo Kawaramachi this evening. You might come across something interesting."
I strained my ears for a response, but none came.
I lifted my feet from the washbasin and made for the door. But when I opened it, I found the hallway empty, save for the echoing strains of the Railway Song.

In the end, I managed to shake off the allure of the foot bath, reignite my ire at the world around me, and head out into the night.
The rain had let up at last, but the cold assaulted my frame more fiercely than ever.
The Shijo Kawaramachi intersection, the location designated by Shikama for the night's protest, is the meeting point of two major roads in eastern Kyoto: Shijo Street and Kawaramachi Street. Both roads are crowded with trendy shops and other venues said to be for the purpose of youthful enjoyment, though I could never for the life of me figure out how one was supposed to enjoy them.
I was traversing the block of Kawaramachi Street between Sanjo and Shijo Streets, observing the endless waves of humanity that packed my surroundings. Every speck of real estate was plastered with red and green. Every shop screamed *Christmas!* with its decor. Vacuous rings of intertwined evergreen foliage—the name for which I do not know—hung at regular intervals along the street, each strangled to death by lengths of gold streamers. Decorative lights twinkled madly, and entire sides of buildings were defaced with Christmas tree imagery and yuletide graffiti written in foreign phrases.

And among it all, the people wandered to and fro, in and out of shops, delighted as can be. It was nonsensical. The only possible explanation I could come up with was that everyone in the city had simultaneously decided to use this heathen holiday as an excuse to fritter away his or her life savings.

With each step forward, the crowd grew denser yet. I pushed and pushed to get through. A hundred different Christmas songs blared out onto the street from a hundred different storefronts, all blending together into one shameless, pulsating rhythm designed to toy with my sanity.

The thought of spending another second in this downtown mania was more than I could bear, so I fought my way to one side and slipped onto Teramachi Street, which was decidedly less mad. I entered a tobacconist and browsed their collection of cigars for a time, and then, seeking further calm, delved into the Nishiki Market. The market, too, was crowded, but at least this was a place where no one gave a damn about Christmas. I'd be able to burn some time without constant agitation eating away at my mind.

I happily walked the market aisles, peering at seafood on display in Styrofoam crates, wrapping myself in the mouthwatering, fishy aromas of dried baby sardines, kombu kelp, and bonito flakes. Soon I was feeling peckish, and I found myself staring intently at the grilled eel liver kebabs on display at the front of one shop. Perhaps, I reflected, it would be wise to partake of some nourishment while time allowed, to store up strength for the unknown struggle ahead.

"Hey, there!"

Few things are more disconcerting than to be caught staring at an object of desire with obvious abandon. I straightened my back, scrambling to compose myself before turning to confront the man who had addressed me. When I finally did so, my breath caught in my chest, and my muscles froze.

It was Ebizuka.

From each of his hands dangled an oversize plastic grocery bag filled nearly to bursting. I could not discern the contents.

Ebizuka's expression, however, was plain. My erstwhile rival greeted me with a wide, toothy grin.

I stammered a greeting. "O-oh. Long time no see."

"Hah! The hell are you doing here?" he bellowed. "This isn't your scene!"

“Ah yes, well… About that…”
Ebizuka glanced in the direction of my naked desire. “Ooh. Eel liver, huh? You thinking of buying a snack?”
Without providing any opportunity for me to reply, Ebizuka called to the middle-aged woman tending the shop. “Two of the liver skewers, if you would.”
When he’d received his purchase, he handed one to me.
“Well? What are you waitin’ for? Chow down! It always bothered me, y’know? I can’t figure out why you’re so damn skinny. You got tuberculosis or something? You need more nutrition.”
Not seeing any other way out of the encounter, I began to munch on the skewer of eel liver right there in front of the shop. Memories of the other day’s dream resurfaced: Ebizuka bursting his way into my room, seeking vengeance. The reality of our unexpected reunion was different, to say the least. Honestly, I was a bit appalled by the gap.
I asked meekly, “Might I inquire as to what brings you here today?”
“Me? Procurement, of course.”
He flashed another toothy grin.
“I’m working at a shop just down the street from Ginkaku Temple. Stop by sometime, yeah?”
“I’ll be sure to do that.”
My mind was still whirling, recounting the sight of Ebizuka diving from the window in the restaurant at Kiyamachi, then waving his katana around wildly in the shallows of the Takase River. I had no idea what had happened to him between then and now, but the pathetic, hapless aura he’d once exuded was nowhere to be found. Somewhere along the way, the universe had breathed new life into Ebizuka.
(For my readers’ sake, I’d like to be abundantly clear: In no way was my new perception of Ebizuka skewed by the fact that he’d treated me to a kebab.)
We chewed on our skewers of eel liver. Passersby seemed to find us an amusing sight. Ebizuka inhaled the last few bits of his snack, then picked his two large plastic bags back up off the ground.
“Hah! Keep at it.” He laughed as I continued to gnaw away. “You’ll get there.”
He looked me up and down once more and said, “And put a little more meat on your bones. Girls aren’t into the skinny bookworm type these days.”

At that moment, a young woman—probably a college student—came walking down the street. She carried a cake box in one hand and was humming the tune to Osamu Yoshioka and Asei Kobayashi's "Hasty Santa Claus."
Ebizuka's eyes followed the woman's movements in a calm, leisurely manner. The slight whisper of a sigh escaped his mouth.
"Heh. I almost forgot," he mused. "It's nearly Christmas, isn't it?"
And then, with his two overstuffed grocery bags dangling from his hands, he set off, wading his way through the crowds of the Nishiki Market. I called after him, half a mouthful of eel liver stuffed in my cheek.
"Thank you for the food!"
Ebizuka didn't turn. He just lifted his right hand, heavy plastic bag and all, as he continued on his way.

At the time of my encounter with Ebizuka, Ido was apparently competing in a music trivia quiz at the Suzuki Record Shop on Teramachi Street. I could not tell you why in the world the shop had decided to invite the wayward male masses to leave their homes and brave the holiday furor for a trivia quiz on Christmas Eve—nor why Ido had taken the shop up on its offer. I half wanted to praise my friend for his unflagging determination to engage in pursuits that would only bring him sadness and half wanted to caution him that some lines are better left uncrossed.
When Ido appeared at the southeast corner of Christmas-choked Shijo Kawaramachi at five o'clock, he was predictably and visibly disappointed, his gloomy visage a full shade darker than usual. Storm clouds swirled and rumbled directly over his head, such that I'd spotted his approach from a good fifty meters away. Today, the man was the walking incarnation of worldly jealousy.
He took a spot at my side, and the two of us exchanged listless greetings.
We'd sought shelter under the covered walkway just outside the Hankyu Department Store. We waited aimlessly for Shikama's arrival as a lost child might wait for a parent. Looking back, I think it was perhaps the most excruciating wait I've ever endured in my life.
As evening descended, the city lights grew more beautiful and more painful yet. A gigantic, dazzling LED signboard reading KEIHAN ELECTRIC RAILWAY

loomed above the Shijo Kawaramachi intersection. Each time the crossing lights changed, one human wave rolled in from the direction of the Takashimaya Department Store, and another rolled in from the direction of the Great Shijo Bridge. The two waves crashed at a point right before our eyes, as if we had front-row seats to an endless series of reenactments of the Battle of Sekigahara.

I couldn't shake the feeling that many of the passersby looked upon us with pity. They saw us as two young men frozen with indecision or two shabby castoffs with nowhere to go to enjoy the delights of Christmas Eve. I very nearly decided to head home on the spot, but a sideward glance at Ido revealed that his state was even worse. He looked so gloomy that I worried his breath could stop at any moment. Clearly, I couldn't abandon my brother-in-arms to suffer alone.

Among the people weaving their way through the area, we saw countless young men and women strolling by, bags emblazoned with department store logos clutched to their chests. The bags likely contained thoughtful gifts either to or from a significant other. They would surely be neat and inoffensive—the sort of presents I would never conceive of. I knew with absolute certainty that no bag contained a *maneki-neko* capable of waving on in nigh perpetuity thanks to a solar panel at its base.

Thoughts of the bags and their contents only worsened the agony of our wait. It occurred to me that Ido and I had reached a decisive moment. We were locked in battle at the pass on Mount Tenno, praying our general would soon appear. If our position fell to the enemy, the war would be lost. We refocused our forces upon Kawaramachi OPA, a shopping center just up the street, unleashing mental fury upon its glittering window displays. Of all the buildings in this neighborhood, OPA was perhaps the most repulsive, with its unabashed devotion to high fashion and festive Christmas spirit.

I must have been a miserable sight huddling on the fringe of Shijo Kawaramachi on Christmas Eve. I felt like a trembling criminal, my legs locked in the stocks of the town courtyard, desperately hoping not to be seen—and especially not by any personal acquaintances.

But as luck would have it, caught up in one of the human waves rushing in from Takashimaya was Lady Uemura.

I quickly grabbed Ido's arm, thinking to drag him inside the Hankyu Department Store. But I was too late. The Evil Eye fixed right upon us, zooming in on our moment of shame. We were two frogs leered at by a hungry snake. I abandoned my attempt to flee and offered Lady Uemura a sheepish smile. She made a beeline toward us.

"Evening," she said, joining us under the covered walkway. "What are you two doing here?"

"Frankly, I'd like to ask you the same thing."

I was mustering every shred of resistance I could manage in the face of the evil eye. Ido, for his part, had already deserted his post on the front lines. He was now cowering at my back.

"I'm here to meet a friend," replied Lady Uemura.

"Ah, how lovely," I said. "As for the two of us, we're, ah, planning to take part in a certain event that's scheduled for this evening."

"Sounds like fun."

I felt quite certain that neither Ido nor I looked as if we expected to have fun.

"I've been running into a lot of familiar faces today," Lady Uemura continued. "I came across Yushima just a moment ago."

"Oh-ho?"

I envisioned Yushima wandering aimlessly among the neighborhood's tawdry displays, alone and shivering in the cold, uncaring gale. It very nearly brought me to tears.

"That reminds me…" Lady Uemura pulled out her schedule book and briskly flicked through the pages.

"I've been asking around about the year-end party. It sounds like the twenty-seventh works best for everyone."

She looked me in the eye. "I'm sure you won't have any conflicts."

She then turned to Ido. "How about you?"

Ido, not expecting the sudden shift of attention, cowered farther behind my back. He stared down at his feet as he replied, "Wow, um… Are you really sure you want someone like me at your party?"

"I don't see any problem. Who's going to complain?"

Exasperated, Lady Uemura turned back to me. "All right, so it's settled. See you both there."

“By the way,” I inquired, “where will you be meeting your, ahem, ‘friend’ this evening?”
“Over in Sanjo.”
“Ah. Excellent. Not to be presumptuous, but I’d recommend avoiding Shijo Kawaramachi this evening.”
“Why’s that?”
Her evil eye gleamed, brighter than ever thanks to the neighborhood’s dazzling lights.
I knew that as long as the fearsome eye remained in Shijo Kawaramachi to lord over its surroundings, we would never be able to instigate our Eejanaika Uprising. Our day of reckoning would never arrive. Our era of exaltation would never begin. Though we would try to resist, the power of her gaze would be too great, and we would sink into a detestable quagmire of our own shame. The tragedy of our second year would play out again; we’d crumple in the cold winter wind and find ourselves driven to the banks of the Kamo, defeated by Christmas Eve once more.
I had to keep that from happening.
She glared at me, eyes ripe with suspicion.
“Don’t tell me you boys are planning another one of your ridiculous little spectacles.”
“Goodness, no. Whatever gave you that idea?”
“Let me guess. Shikama’s behind it, isn’t he?”
She was a scalpel, smartly slicing through any deception I could summon.
I refused to answer her question, instead lifting my hand to wave good-bye, hoping it would suffice to drive her off.
“Degenerates need not involve themselves in our affairs,” I said. “And we’ve definitely no need of anyone who already has plans to spend a happy holiday evening with her beau. Go on, now. Shoo. If you stick near us tonight, you’re liable to get burned.”
“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.”
Lady Uemura sighed and began walking away. Not two steps out, she whirled on her heel and leaned in close, her wind-reddened cheeks nearly touching mine. I trembled like a rabbit kit. Her evil eye held me mercilessly in its gaze.

“Frankly,” she whispered, “I think it’s about time you grew out of that nonsense.”
She straightened, turned, and merged back in with the crowd.
“Damn Evil Eye,” I muttered as I watched her go.
I glanced over at Ido. The man was gasping for breath. The overwhelming shame of having to loiter here at the center of the Christmas Eve congestion had overwhelmed him. I, too, was barely managing to keep my self-respect from crumbling to pieces. I desperately searched the surrounding chaos for some means of salvation.

And then he was there: Our hero stood at the far end of the crosswalk. The bandage across his chin shone in the night, a white beacon of hope. He was expressionless, but something inside told me that this was the calm before the storm.
When the crossing light turned green, he strode toward us. And once he was at our side, he said, in the tiniest whisper:
Eejanaika.
Ido quietly responded in kind.
Eejanaika.
I joined in, too.
Eejanaika.
And then Shikama said it again, the tiniest bit louder, this time directing his voice at a male student about to pass by. The student continued walking, at first appearing to ignore us. But under Shikama’s oddly intense gaze, he, too, blurted it out, ever so softly:
Eejanaika.
Shikama repeated the refrain, and the student again echoed, this time breaking out into a wide grin.
Eejanaika.
Eejanaika.
It was a chant now. Our voices were still little more than whispers, but the four of us were all saying it, rhythmically in turn. Shikama began to stare in the eyes of passersby as he repeated our cry. Some were appalled by our apparent lunacy. But every few attempts, Shikama would get a response back. A young

man with bleached hair was standing on the sidewalk nearby, handing out advertisement-laden packets of tissues. He grinned, seeming to enjoy the show, and then decided to join in:

Eejanaika.

Each time he handed out a packet, he repeated the call. A small group of high school girls laughed as they accepted the tissues and echoed back:

Eejanaika.

And now that the girls had joined in, everyone on the sidewalk was looking on in curiosity.

Eejanaika.

Eejanaika.

Eejanaika.

The restless evening atmosphere proved the perfect medium; our battle cry was readily taken up and soon permeated the entire street corner. A middle-aged man in a suit regarded us in horror and tried to rush by, but several women loitering near a storefront barred his way. They stared at him, proclaiming:

Eejanaika!

To which the terrified man, unsure what else to do, responded:

Eejanaika!

A group of three middle-aged women began yelling for all they were worth into the night.

Eejanaika!

Eejanaika!

A curiously high-spirited group of men barreled onto the scene, eager to get in on the fun.

Eejanaika!

Eejanaika!

Eejanaika!

Numerous couples walking hand in hand paused on the sidewalk to join us.

Eejanaika!

Eejanaika!

Eejanaika!

Eejanaika!

Eejanaika!

Within five minutes, it was no longer possible to tell who was shouting or from what direction the latest cry had come. The whole street was erupting with our chant.

At times, truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

I looked over at Shikama. He was bathed in the vibrant light of a nearby storefront. He smiled back at me and said:

Eejanaika.

The mass of people around us began to churn and seethe. I looked up and saw a massive black shadow headed toward us, cutting its way through the crowd. As it drew nearer, I saw that it was a man, face obscured by a bristly mess of beard. The sea of humanity parted, and Takayabu broke through, exclaiming:

Eejanaika!

It would be difficult to accurately describe how our homegrown uprising proceeded from there. It had ballooned into something far too large for its entirety to be grasped from any one location. The crowd pulsated like surging waves, writhing around me. It felt like the height of the Gion Festival.

From what I could tell, the riots were proceeding outward, up and down every adjacent street, with Shijo Kawaramachi at the epicenter. Shouts of "Eejanaika!" reverberated throughout the sky, blowing Christmas Eve out of the city altogether. The crowd undulated, hundreds of voices turning the unanimous refrain into one joyous roar. Every face I caught sight of in the light of the city's streetlights was entranced, cheeks red, spirits high.

I wouldn't know it until long after the fact, but word of the uprising spread quickly: Youths from all over were jumping aboard the Keihan and Hankyu train lines, pouring into Shijo Kawaramachi to be a part of this bizarre new movement. The city even mobilized its police forces.

Hardly a soul among that ever-expanding riot knew the truth—that the spark that ignited their fervor was just a single, unassuming word haphazardly chosen by our eccentric leader.

Eejanaika.

But alas, such is the way of the world.

Soon I, too, was being pushed to and fro by the human waves stirred by our cheer. Shikama had climbed atop the handrail that runs along Kawaramachi Street, from where he continued to shout, “Eejanaika!”

Ido was buried somewhere in the crowd—I knew not where. Takayabu had remained visible above the crowd for some time, a steadfast precipice in the violent sea. But eventually, I lost sight of him, too.

With a great deal of exertion, I managed to pull free of the crowd and scramble atop the handrail with Shikama. I wobbled there precariously. My new vantage point revealed a hint of how our movement had grown, and my breath caught in my throat. The crowd had spilled out onto the roadway, its rising chant now punctuated by the occasional blare of an automobile horn.

I spotted someone on the other side of the street that I thought might be Yushima, but he vanished before I could be certain. Whoever it was, he’d been chanting along, all but crying at the top of his lungs.

Eejanaika!

Eejanaika!

The sea of people continued to writhe, completely consumed by their own chanting. I scanned the crowd again, this time catching a glimpse of Mizuo. Her tiny form wove and wavered as she was jostled—*Eejanaika!*—by the crowd. Close behind her—*Eejanaika!*—was Endou. He was trying to keep up, but—*Eejanaika! Eejanaika!*—the unpredictable currents stymied his efforts. The man’s frustration—*Eejanaika!*—was palpable. Suddenly, he—*Eejanaika!*—looked up. His eyes met mine—*Eejanaika!*—and he glared at me with unmistakable hatred. I—*Eejanaika!*—glared back.

Mizuo was ducking—*Eejanaika!*—and squeezing her way among the countless—*Eejanaika!*—bodies. She passed right in front of me—*Eejanaika!*—but did not seem to notice. She boldly pushed on, searching—*Eejanaika!*—scouring the clamor—*Eejanaika!*—looking for a way out.

“Mizuo!” I called—*Eejanaika!*—from my spot up on the handrail.

The endless cries—*Eejanaika!*—drowned my voice. I knew there was no way she’d—*Eejanaika!*—heard me. I saw her continue to push, rocking to and fro—*Eejanaika!*—like a lonely buoy among cruel ocean waves. Her short—*Eejanaika!*—clean-cut hair bobbed in and out of view. I could no longer—*Eejanaika!*—see

Endou. Not that I cared what happened to him. I would have been perfectly happy for him to vanish among the chaos.

Ignoring a surge of guilt for abandoning Shikama's cause, I plunged down from the handrail, pushing my way through the bodies in the direction Mizuo had been carried off. I thought I heard Shikama yelling after me: a long, drawn-out "Heeeey!"

I was immediately enveloped by the crowd—*Eejanaika! Eejanaika! Eejanaika!*—and their cries. I was trying my damnedest to get through, frantically shoving my way forward. The sea of people pushed back on all sides—*Eejanaika! Eejanaika!*—threatening to crush me.

My anger began to boil, and I shouted, "Shut up! Enough with the *Eejanaika*!"

I wrenched several bodies aside and was about to push past a young woman with bleached hair—*Eejanaika!*—flinging her head about in the throes of ecstasy. As I scrambled near, the back of her skull—*Eejanaika!*—slammed into my nose, and my vision momentarily went white. My hand shot up to one side of the bleached head—*Eejanaika!*—to shove it aside. I punched the face of a frenzied man who kept leaning in on me. All the while, I scanned for Mizuo—*Eejanaika!*— straining to see above the heads around me. *Eejanaika! Eejanaika! Eejanaika!* I was agitated. *Eejanaika!* I was livid. *Eejanaika!* I shouted—*Eejanaika!*—for all I was worth.

"You wanna know why the hell not?! Because it *matters*!"

By some miracle, I regained sight of Mizuo. I saw her squeeze free of the riot and escape down a narrow side street between two multipurpose buildings. With a burst of determination, I also pulled free of the fray and hurried down the same side street. But I was too late. She was gone. I stood panting, white breath pouring from my open mouth, lost for what to do next.

Something cold brushed my cheek, and I looked up to find flecks of white gently falling from the tiny strip of visible black sky.

"Mizuo!" I called into the surroundings.

There was no response.

The frenzied cries—*Eejanaika!*—continued on the street behind me, an unending chorus. But at least I couldn't hear the faintest strain of any Christmas song.

For a while, I simply stood there. At some point, Shikama casually sauntered in from the main street. Despite being the mastermind of the disturbance, he wore the look of an innocent bystander. He seemed neither regretful nor triumphant. His hands were stuffed into his coat pockets. His expression was unconcerned. Flat. The bandage on his chin had come partly loose and now dangled freely.

“Eejanaika,” he offered listlessly, reaching a hand up to re-tuck the bandage as if he’d done so a dozen times already.

“Oh, don’t get me started,” I spat back.

“Hmph. Well said.”

Shikama gave a slight chuckle, then added, “I wonder what happened to Takayabu and Ido. Think they got out safely?”

“I imagine so.”

Shikama followed my gaze up to the sky and muttered, “Blast. It’s snowing.”

And then, as if he had already come to accept it, he added, “Well, I guess that’s to be expected.”

“I think I’ll head home,” I said, lighting a smoke.

Shikama patted the bag slung across his shoulder.

“I’m going to find a table at McDonald’s and study for a while.”

Apparently, he’d been carrying his textbooks around all evening.

“When do you suppose we’ll see each other next?” I asked.

“You’ll be at the year-end party, yes? I was informed by Miss Uemura that you would be going.”

“Yes. I’ll be there. See you then.”

“Sounds good.”

“Take care,” I said.

“You too,” he responded, and then added, “I think I’ll go this way.”

He traipsed farther down the dim, narrow alley in search of a place to study in peace. He began to hum and then to sing, his voice echoing between the narrow walls.

Lo, the pink petals are a shroud of mist
above the students on the eastern bench.
The moon is a pearl in the distant sky
casting its soft glow on Yoshida’s peak.

It was the old school song.
“What in hell’s name would possess you to start singing that?” I shouted after him.
Shikama shrugged off my comment, still humming as he slipped through a tiny gap at the far end of the alley. And then he was gone.

From off to one side came the ring of a train station bell signaling a departure.

As I sat upon the gently rocking Eizan, I reminisced upon her many qualities.
I remembered the way she looked as she stared up at the Tower and the sound of her voice as we walked the banks of the Kamo together. “Let’s set some ground rules,” she’d said to me. “No matching outfits. If I ever propose that we dress alike, I give you full permission to knock me unconscious.”
I recalled our visit to the Lake Biwa Canal Museum, where we gazed on with smiles as the water gently gurgled by. Her birthday gift to me, a copy of *A Reference Guide to Human Deaths*. The time she pretended to be a bipedal robot on the train platform, lurching across the concrete with a most peculiar gait.
I thought about how she would put an ice cube in her miso soup, on account of her tongue being quick to burn. I remembered the time she absentmindedly cooked a stack of twenty *dorayaki* treats.
I saw her engrossed in the ten quires of Uji—that final stretch of *The Tale of Genji* I never managed to complete.
I remembered the way she liked to dump a big scoop of rice into her corn soup. The elaborate plot descriptions she’d give of whatever comic she was currently into. The invitations to watch VHS recordings of her favorite stand-up comedians. The way she’d sink with sadness after a mean-spirited outburst. The way she’d lose herself among the stalls of the open-air used book market at the Shimogamo Shrine. The time she ordered grilled sparrow and declared, “Now I’m a real Kyoto woman.”
The way she often fell ill and had to stay in bed. The time I bought her eel liver to bolster her health, only for her to break out in hives instead. The night she coldly rejected my *maneki-neko* gift and me. The way snow stuck to her bangs during the first snowfall of that winter we were together.

The way she'd ask "What is it about me that you love?" just to see me fume. The way she stood beside me when I was depressed and didn't know what to do—and the way it made her feel lost and uncertain, too. The way she held her tongue when I grew irritated and hurled angry words.

The times we walked along the banks of the Kamo wrapped in darkness, the times we walked the neighborhoods near Shimogamo under the night sky, and the times we walked through Commemorative Park together in the bright of morning. The way her eyes sparkled with curiosity when she saw something new. Her gentle laughter, like she was hiding some great secret.

At times, she fell silent. At times, she grew angry. She cried. She slept. She curled up into a ball like a cat and left me behind each night to dream of the Tower of the Sun.

I recalled the evening she last stopped by my lodgings when we had our final talk. I remained the perfect gentleman throughout the encounter. At its conclusion, I shook her hand wordlessly, and the two of us parted ways.

After she left, I sat in my four-and-a-half-mat room, dazed and directionless. After some thought, I decided that a typical man in my situation would proceed to get dead drunk. I resolved to be typical for once and grabbed some alcohol.

A few drinks in—and much to my surprise—I found I was rather enjoying the typical way of going about things. I sent a text to Shikama detailing what had occurred.

When his response arrived, it read:

If we assume that happiness is a finite resource, your misfortune necessarily creates a surplus elsewhere in the system. I, of course, intend to locate that surplus and claim it for myself.

I took another great gulp of liquor and cackled at my compatriot's response. He truly was a great man.

A few more drinks, and I felt I'd sprouted wings. I began to wonder. Where had I gone wrong?

Of course, try as one might, it is quite impossible to have a productive search for answers when sequestered in a floating castle of inebriation. Far from providing answers, my efforts were thrusting me deep into a maze of confusion.

Was it because of the Christmas gift—that solar-powered *maneki-neko*? Was it because I'd insisted she try the eel liver based only on my own preference—and her subsequent case of awful red welts? Was it because I never managed to get through the ten quires of Uji, and she thought less of me for it? Was it because I introduced her to the Tower of the Sun? Or…? Or…? Or was it because I was simply so great that she could never hope to understand me?

I remained awake all night, taking sips of liquor here and there until just before dawn. Around five in the morning, I decided to head out. I wandered the town, indifferent to the piercing cold. I stopped at a twenty-four-hour beef-bowl restaurant to fill my belly.

As I passed through the still-dark neighborhoods, it occurred to me that, really, all this meant was that I'd gone back to my prior state. It was no great calamity. I needn't think myself thrust into the depths of misfortune or loneliness.

I was no longer obliged to stay attentive to her feelings or to have my own moods driven by hers. I'd not have to endure the quips she made when she did not care for something I'd done. I would no longer suffer the unruly urges of my second head. And I'd no longer have to arrange my schedule or set aside time for mutual outings.

I was now free in the fullest sense of the word. I had cast off the fetters of our relationship and could finally return to being my true and honest self. Surely, I would soon recover from the state of mental disarray that is love. In truth, this turn of events was quite fortunate.

In the face of heartbreak, the common man envisions himself the hero of a tragedy. He stumbles out into the pouring rain, lamenting his cruel lot, even when in truth his love was no grand story for the ages. He puts his disgrace on display for all the world to see. Oh, what folly!

I, for one, would not allow myself to sink to such a state.

I was churning those thoughts over and over, still walking the early morning streets, when snow began to fall silently from the deep-indigo sky. I stopped, lolled my drunken head about a bit until I managed to angle it back, and stared at the heavens. Frosted fragments fluttered down one after another, alighting on my flushed cheeks.

There had been a night like this, two winters ago.

We’d been walking outside when the first snow of the season began to fall. I saw that some snow had settled on her bangs. I reached over and gently brushed it away.
It had happened so smoothly. So gracefully. And—not to sing my own praises—it had seemed to me quite the thoughtful gesture.
Yes. I could still picture her standing in the endlessly falling snow. The memory was so vivid it was almost as if she were here with me now.
But I would not allow myself to be swept up in the saccharine intoxication of nostalgia.
I swore it to myself. I would not succumb.
I continued to walk the early morning neighborhood under the falling snow, squeezing myself, trying my hardest, until finally I had to surrender.
Just today, I decided, tears welling in my eyes.
Allow me to dwell upon the past, just for today.

I stepped off the Eizan and into a meadow bright with spring. The Tower of the Sun was there, just beyond the trees. I saw a figure in the distance—a tiny mote bending back with all its might to take in the full height of the Tower.
I strode across the crisp grass, aiming for a spot at her side. The refreshing scent of green filled the air, and the springtime breeze was cool upon my cheeks. All was quiet. It was the type of calm you only find at the ends of the earth.

Of what transpired next, I have no intent to write.
I’ve no need to, dear readers, for my tale ends more or less just as you’ve imagined.

Somehow, in some way, they must be fundamentally mistaken.
And I suppose that I, too, am most likely in the wrong.

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